

*Translated from the Russian
Translated by Vladimir Alexandrov*

ВНЕШНЯЯ ПОЛИТИКА

Foreign Policy

His outstanding career

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FOREWORD

THE PROSE OF VICTOR ASTASIEV

In his autobiographical sketch *Part of All Living Things* Victor Astasiev rightly points out how dangerous it is for a writer to rely solely on his background, no matter how interesting it may be. "I too entered literature 'as a representative of the working class'," he writes, "but somehow I had the sense not to go for the hook with the cheap, artificial bait. Yet I might have, encouraged by approving slaps on the back, I might have knocked at the doors of the brahmans of literature, beating my chest 'Let me in, I'm a working lad'!"

We can take Astasiev at his word here. For behind this attitude to his own biography as a writer is the deeply personal, hard won conviction that literature is a serious and responsible occupation, which does not make do with second best. "In Russian literature," Astasiev repeats tirelessly, "there should be no over-indulgence, no amateurism... We have no right to that... For behind us tower such titans, such a brilliant literature, that before taking a reader away from them for a day, even an hour, each of us must ask himself what right he has to do so."

Victor Astasiev's biography, as a man and as a writer, gives him the right to deliver this stern warning.

His first story *The Civic Man* was written during night duty at a sausage factory where he worked as a stevedore and night watchman. By then his curriculum vitae was a hungry, parentless Siberian childhood, the orphanage in Igarka, an elementary factory-workers' training, active service, war wounds, hard physical labour—and six years' schooling. This was the budding writer's "education".

Later, in reply to the question "How do you get the plots of your works—by chance or do you look for them in real life?" Astasiev was to say: "Plots aren't mushrooms, it would be pointless for me at least to go looking for them. What usually happens

is that a plot finds me, so to speak. As a rule my plots come from memories of the past, that is, from the time when I was not a writer and did not know I would ever be one and, consequently, could not have looked for plots."

Talent aside, professionalism is something that comes with time and hard work. "A writer's work is a constant, complex, exhausting quest, which sometimes leads to despair." It was with this sense of dedication that Astafiev, and other like-minded writers, entered the field of literature. This prophetic sense of responsibility to literature and to the reader has left its mark on his finest works.

For him literature is a tireless quest for truth. The writer embarks on it, relying on his own vast experience, the mighty traditions of Russian and Soviet literature, and the workings of the heart and mind, enriched by the treasures of modern human knowledge. His books are distinguished by a wealth and accuracy of the Siberian vernacular and, notably, by a profound moral and philosophical culture, a culture of thought and feeling.

When you read through Astafiev's books, beginning with the ones in which he was finding his feet as a writer, the stories *The Pass*, *The Old Oak*, *Falling Stars*, *The Theft*, *The Last Bow*, *The Shepherd and the Shepherdess*, and *Queen Fish*, and his collections of short stories you can see clearly how rapidly this original writer has developed, how his literary skill has grown.

Critics have often pointed out that Viktor Astafiev made his debut as a writer in the true sense of the word with the story *The Pass* (1959); the eminent Soviet critic Anatoli Makarov once wrote that *The Pass* is the first of a cycle of stories which could be called "A History of My Contemporaries". These prophetic words involuntarily come to mind as one picks up the new Astafiev collection published recently by Molodaya Gvardia, which includes *The Old Oak*, *The Theft*, *The Last Bow* and *The Shepherd and the Shepherdess*. For the writer has called it "Stories About My Contemporaries".

In his development from the somewhat naive *The Pass* and in many respects contradictory *The Old Oak* to the tragic story *The Theft* and later to the lyrical *The Last Bow* and *The Shepherd and the Shepherdess*, that "modern pastoral" as the writer himself has described this story, Astafiev has acquired new literary qualities and at the same time overcome his weak points.

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For him literature is a useless quest for truth. The writer embarks on it, relying on his own vast experience, the mighty traditions of Russian and Soviet literature, and the workings of the heart and mind, enriched by the treasures of modern human knowledge. His books are distinguished by a wealth and accuracy of the Siberian vernacular and, notably, by a profound moral and philosophical culture, a culture of thought and feeling.

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What is the secret of this enthusiasm which pursues and pursues the heart? The answer to this question is partly to be found in the interesting *Old to a Russian Childhood*—a lyrical and in many respects delicate story which evokes the theme about the boy in very difficult circumstances, not not about his suffering but about his happiness. About the happiness of being and being oneself to be part of all living things, about the mystery of his fusion with all that is alive, be it people or nature, which occupies a most important place in Astafiev's writing, the top of his work which, in spite of all obstacles, has nourished his heart ever childhood and is leading him to man's main purpose—"to do good".

"Listen, memory," he says to himself in this story, "recreate the boy within me, let me rest and purify myself beside him." What makes the boy of those distant and difficult years so dear to the Astafiev of today? He is dear to him not only as an unforgettable memory of childhood, he takes the writer (and consequently, the reader also) back with him "to where there were your people living in a real land, who loved you just for yourself, just because you were you, and who wanted only one thing in return—your love."

"Lit by the sun" Astafiev's boy is a kind of magic guide in Astafiev's writing, a guide to the world of nature and work where albeit in hard and sometimes tragic circumstances he nevertheless

lived in a "real" land, surrounded by real people who were guided in their relationships with him by the single moral law of life—the human conscience.

The originality of Astafiev's talent is seen in the way he combines what would seem to be the uncombinable: rich and skilled description of everyday life, attention to detail, on the one hand, with a profound spiritual and philosophical element, harsh, sometimes cruel realism with a lyrical, poetic style, particularly in the passages on love and nature where the poetry sometimes reaches an elevated romanticism. But far from contradicting real life, this actually makes it more profound and tangible. What we call the romantic element in the work of this strikingly realist writer, is actually the tension and power of the poetic feeling inherent in the very nature of his talent.

The direction of this feeling is obvious, the object of his affection is clear and austere: it is his country, Russia, its countryside and people, their mission on this earth. And, more precisely, Soviet Russia, because for Astafiev who began life, as he writes, "in the year of Lenin's death", no other Russia exists.

Victor Astafiev's love of his country is pure, noble and moral love. He is developing in the tradition of the democratic interpretation of the national spirit, which has always been the pride and strength of Russian and Soviet literature. Astafiev has a profound and intense dislike of avareiciousness, inhumanity and brutality which, to his mind, were present to a large measure in old village life and which he discusses in *The Old Oak*. It is this, together with the opium of religion, that he regards as the source of many of the moral calamities of the past.

The theme of internationalism, as a constant, profound feature of popular life, as natural as air or water, is an organic and important element of Astafiev's work. The writer asserts the union and not separation of people in *The Old Oak*, *The Pass* and *The Theft* where he portrays the moving figure of Tolya Mazov's older friend, the Ossetian Ibrahim. *The Last Bow* begins with a story about Vassya, a Polish violinist who loses his sight. The author again heard his music, the music of the distant, almost forgotten past, when he was on duty in the last autumn of the war in a small Polish town which had been almost razed to the ground by the retreating Nazis. "The music triumphed over the charred ruins, that very music which a man who had not seen his native land all

Shepherdless and The Last Day

The noble sentiment of *The Shepherd and the Shepherdess** lies not only in the author's condemnation of the inhumanity of fascism, but also in his passionate assertion that even the terrible experience of war did not distort, or break the humanity of Soviet people.

*The Last Day*** is a book of stories of an autobiographical nature, which was written slowly, stage by stage, to form finally a single narrative, a broad panorama of peasant life in the 1930s and 1940s. The author's intimate biographical knowledge of the village life, combined with his literary talent, sober realism, and

* Published by Progress Publishers in the collection *The House with a Pink Roof* in 1978.

** Some stories from this cycle were also included in the above-mentioned collection.

sharp eye for detail ensured the success of *The Last Bow*, which was an outstanding event in Soviet prose. Like *The Shepherd and the Shepherdess*, *The Last Bow* is a book which will be read for many generations to come, not only because of the author's obvious talent and first-hand knowledge of life, but also because of his high moral stand, his serious, thoughtful and authentic view of popular life, which is void of all idealisation and sentimentality, and full of respect for the collective farm countryside and love for the people who work there.

In *The Last Bow* the story of the large Potylin peasant family really centres round the hero's grandmother, Katernina Petrovna, a truly popular character, large, and true to life. We leaf through page after page of the writer's childhood and before us there unfolds a lyrical chronicle of a large Siberian family and of the whole village as well. And not only a chronicle, but a passionate declaration of love for Russia, a naked confession which enables us to approach the holy of holies—the inner world of the characters in his autobiographical and, consequently, documentary story, and the moral precepts by which they live. We find ourselves in a broad, wide and bright world, full of goodness, love and respect for people. Goodness that is not abstract, but socially active and effective. The author is seeking to recreate in the novel the true picture of his beloved "small country" behind which stands the image of the whole land.

Astafiev puts his trust in those pure elements among the people which are formed by man's labour and which contrast with the greed, social egoism and inner callousness that also manifest themselves in the contradictory peasant character. He shows that the moral integrity of Bons Kostyaev or the inner world of the hero of the autobiographical novel did not arise out of thin air. On the contrary, Kostyaev's spiritual power, the strength and firmness of the Soviet character which manifested itself so heroically during the war, lie in its deep historical roots, in the organic merging of the socialist world outlook with the age-old aspirations of working people, with the finest, noblest traditions of their native land. It is precisely in this, the Soviet, popular character embodied in the writer's grandmother Katernina Petrovna and her numerous children, in Bons Kostyaev and the men of his platoon and, finally, in the characters of the latest work *Queen Fish* that Victor Astafiev's native land, the Russia of yesterday and today, is personified in his work.

Yet this impression is at the same time a deceptive one. It is the fruit not only of the author's real kinship with the traits he portrays, but also of Astafiev's considerable literary skill. Behind the unpretentiousness and seeming lack of plot in the "narration in stories", for all the author's apparently almost complete identification with the life and characters which he describes, one nevertheless senses strongly a curious, subtle and hard won position, which is moreover profoundly rooted and humanistic. The position of a man who has endured not only emotionally but also intellectually the fundamental spiritual and moral problems of his age and been enriched not only by his personal experience, but also the accumulated experience of his society. This position is by no means the same as that of his characters, although it is rooted in the life of the people and has absorbed the age-old wisdom of his native people and been enriched by the achievements of Russian and world thought.

It is this complex unity of rich personal experience and the experience of his people, which gives the author an unusually extensive direct knowledge of life and his remarkably rich indirect knowledge which is called culture and thought, that constitutes the originality of Astafiev's writing, in general, and his *Queen Fish*, in particular, a narrative that reproduces the physical and social environment in which Astafiev has always lived. An environment and life, which if one discounts the specifically Siberian elements was and still is to a large extent, the life of the common people, as it used to be called.

rewarding work of the fishermen, hunters and farmers on it.

With great force and scale, stinging to the quick, the work reveals the noble and truly human qualities that dwell in the people's hearts, in whatever difficult circumstances they may find themselves. His characters are usually far from ideal. "Serpentine-hearted Northerners" live and coexist here side by side with former convicts who have gone through fire and water of the taiga, but nevertheless retain deep down a measure of humanity which compels them to act like human beings. Even the most inveterate of them, Astafiev writes, had hearts that "were lighting up. That happens to a person who does good and is content in the knowledge that he is still capable of doing so and that he is therefore not lost to family and home, to that other department of life."

This ability "to do good" is perhaps what distinguishes Astafiev's characters most, and raises them, as in the case of the hunter and fisherman Akim, to the heights of self-sacrifice in the Siberian wilds. Their human qualities determine the moral loftiness of their actions.

The philosophy of man and his human values which the author of *Queen Fish* preaches is nakedly polemical and partial. Astafiev believes that the values of the human personality derive from human work, "the spiritual link" between people.

Work and nature—these are the major factors in the moral life of Astafiev's characters. Nature is a spiritual, not only an economic factor in human society, an essential condition without which man cannot be man. This is why the Siberian countryside is regarded by the author and the characters in the book as a part of the universe. The real essence of a man's character is tested by the power and beauty of nature.

Astafiev's book is not only an apotheosis of nature, but also a stern warning, that is particularly important in this age of scientific and technological revolution. *Queen Fish* is full of pained anger at poaching in all forms. It is the subject of such angry, publicistic stories as *Black Feather Flying* and *The Turukhanst Lily*. Astafiev writes bitterly that over the centuries our fathers and grandfathers and great-grandfathers got used to living by their own laws: "I'll take what I please in the taiga."

But it would, of course, be inexcusably narrow-minded to interpret Astafiev's *Queen Fish* on a purely ecological level, simply as a work which preaches the conservation of nature. Nature is

important for Astaviev insofar as it helps to reveal man's inner world, his soul. For man is the writer's main interest and concern, his main problem. The men who are near and dear to him, whom he knew in his childhood and adolescence, whom he met again in his recent visit to his native parts. "My native Siberia has altered," the author concludes the book. "Everything flows, everything changes, everything testifies the hoary wisdom of the ages. Thus it was. Thus it is. Thus it shall be."

Will the Siberian countryside stand the test of these changes, and will the open-hearted Northerner, born and bred there stand it too?

This important question has already been answered by life itself. But it is posed and carefully formulated in the book, because it is of such concern to the author. The changes are too abrupt, although, as the book constantly stresses, materially they are for the better without any doubt. One need only compare Akimka's hungry, terrible, poverty-stricken childhood with life today. A civilised life, from transistor radios and televisions to powerful outboard motors—a life that has come to the banks of the Yenisei.

Then why the worry, the concern, the questions which the writer asks himself? "What am I seeking for? Why torment myself? Why?" He is concerned about how to preserve, in this new, civilised, comfortable life, the universal, humanist values of working people's morality which, in spite of all the tribulations, made the Akimkas real people. How to acquire the new without losing the old. How to make sure that people are inwardly in harmony with these real changes, too, that their morality does not give way to spiritual poaching, the human conscience is not ousted by the spirit of acquisitiveness and money-grubbing, which even exploits technological progress for its own selfish ends.

In its concern, its vision of life and nature, and its understanding of the national character Victor Astaviev's prose is true to the finest traditions of Russian and Soviet literature and a worthy continuation of them.

Felix Kuznetsov

QUEEN FISH

Confusion and panic set in because Dad was really not meant to tie his gun at the duck house. But the family held it in back clucking at him from all sides as I retreated away from him. Dad managed however to fire some shots at the ducks but they did not reach his target because it was such a long distance from the shore.

Dad looked away from the family with a guilty wave of his hand, ashamed of his blunder. From then on he never went anywhere near the river cleaners. He would sit down near the edge of the water, look first at the steamer and then round at the bushes behind him to make sure that if anything happened he could make off to the woods just you try and catch me!

At the time I made my unexpected visit to Sushkovo my father had had his fill of the post as fireman at the wood depot and in his heart of hearts he was longing for a change, for some real action. He was planning to try for a job as inspector of the local fishing zone because at that time he considered himself an expert without equal when it came to preserving fish.

I did my best to dissuade him, since a new formidable decree on the subject of financial and other responsibilities had just been issued. I stressed upon him that the family had some here to live, thank Heavens!, and had ample supplies of meat, fish, berries and nuts available in the taiga. I reminded him that he had been one of those who had helped to complete the White Sea Canal ahead of schedule and that he had done his share of labour feats. All he managed by way of a reply was the brief declaration in no uncertain terms that I should not be telling my elders what to do. Soon after I left Sushkovo he went and applied for the inspector's post after all.

A year later I received a letter from him which began with the words, "As I write this letter there are tears running down my cheeks." The lyrical opening to this missive made it easy to conclude that Dad was once again residing in the "little white house". Once again—for the fifteenth time—my father vanished, disappeared without a trace, the tenuous link between myself and my strange, un-
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destroyed was the building I needed most of all, namely the hotel. Local newspaper-men found me a bed in the town's Pioneer camp built at the cape overlooking the river, the highest and driest point for miles around, where the winds used to blow away the mosquitoes and the children used to sleep in little huts without nets.

The next morning I was woken up by their bugle and waited till the morning rush of children was over, before I too went down to the Yenisei to have a wash. I came out and who should I see but a scraggy, sharp-eyed lad with an alert attractive face. He was sitting on a painted bench, wearing his perky little cap and smiling his disarming smile.

I looked round only to see that there was no one else in sight and then I smiled back. Kolya ran up and flung his arms round my neck, almost suffocating me in his bony grip, and then just as Granny from Sisim had done ten years earlier announced in solemn tones

"I'm your brother Kolya!"

Kolya had been no more than a strip of a lad the time before and still remained one although he had already done his military service which he finished as a sergeant. Having received all too little kindness and affection from his parents he had learnt to seek it elsewhere. Laughing one moment, weeping the next he reported on how the family had lived and the children had grown up since my visit to Sushkovo.

After being taken on as the high-ranking inspector Dad had embarked upon escapades that defied description as if he was determined to enjoy as much mischief and wild living as possible before the Flood, and as if every ounce of his common sense had been flung to the wind.

He had once set off to the distant lakes in the tundra along the Pyasina where some fishing teams were stationed, for the most part consisting of women. After living for weeks on fish they were waiting impatiently for money, food vouchers, especially those for bread and flour. Yet Dad indulged in such a desperate spree with some Nenets on the way to the lakes that he forgot all about the fishermen, indeed even about himself. The deer pulled his sledge back from the tundra to transit camp at Plakhino. It was on the sledge that they discovered Dad wrapped up in a fur-coat and bear-skin, his face dark from all his drinking bouts, covered in thick stubble and with frost-bitten ears and

nose. There were multi-coloured streamers flowing on sledge, while money was spilling everywhere from the pockets belonging to the high-ranking inspector. They were only too happy to start playing with the ribbons, pulling them up and tearing them: then my step-mother who over, started to moan in horror and tear her hair out, realised that the streamers were food vouchers and as the money was actually to pay the fishermen with.

He had drunk half the money already. How could he make up the difference? Dad was well and truly drunk but he could appreciate was that he could not possibly make the lakes and visit the fishermen now: after their hunger, people would simply tear him to pieces and throw him through holes in the ice down to the fish. So he turned deer round in their tracks. Yet despite it all he started to sob; frowning despair he shouted out through lips still frozen the cold: "They shall all have what they deserve!" "Mor (director of the fish-factory) is my real friend! Morekhodov will show those brigands." "Brigands" was the name Morekhodov used for the fishermen who used to cope with incredibly hard work out there on those tundra lakes: to get through the ice that was six feet thick they would use cutters and before they reached the water they would have to cut three pieces and the hole would be as deep as a man is high: they worked away without giving in and caught prized variety white fish.

Watching Dad's excesses and listening to him was something that made even the children feel ashamed: everyone realised, including him, that there was no saving the situation.

Sentence was passed on the inspector of the fishing zone by the mobile district court in the club-house Plakhino. Twenty-four years all in all were meted out to the of them for their high life while at the top. After the trial Dad was deported to a labour colony at work on the bridge over Yenisei which was to extend the railway network to the North.

The column of prisoners made its way down to the barges at the bank of the river. Kolya was standing to one side waiting his father so as to hand him a packet of rough tobacco. My step-mother and the children, who had followed my father to Igarka were staying in the house of some friends: there she had fallen sick and had a break-down after the shock. Her head had started

to shake and wobble from side to side and her thin bird-like neck had developed a nervous twitch. It was no wonder she was a broken reed by this time with five children on her hands and no roof over her head, without bread, without a man about the house, however little use he might have been in his time. Kolya, his face looking all pinched and miserable, looked round urgently for his father: he realised all too well that they were going to have a hard time of it, a really hard time. Kolya at first failed to pick out his father in the column of prisoners for his tears. Boyo though caught sight of him at once, leapt up in excitement, began to bark and hurled himself into the prisoners' ranks: he jumped up on his master's chest, licked his face and started pulling him home by his sweater. Boyo had delayed their progress, the prisoners were now out of step and one of the guards' guns was clicked at the ready immediately. Our father who had a submissive, apologetic air about him by this time shielded Boyo from the gun with his own body.

"It's a dog after all. How can he tell what people are up to?" Then, on noticing Kolya in tears, he looked down at the ground. "You'd do better to shoot me, not the dog."

Only with great difficulty did Kolya manage to pull Boyo away from the column. The dog could not understand what was happening and why his master was being taken away. He sent up a whine that could be heard all the way up the landing-stage and then how he tore himself free! He knocked Kolya over and refused to let his master be taken on board, blocking the prisoners' path to the barge.

A young dark-haired guard from the prisoners' escort stopped for a moment, kicked the dog over to one side and then without even lifting the gun strap from his shoulder fired a short volley into the dog at point-blank range.

It was as if Boyo's back had been broken, the front half of his body floundered, his front paws scratched and tore at the path. Boyo was soon grey from the dust he had kicked up. The prisoners tried to avoid treading on the dying dog, they stepped over him and the rows of five were in disarray. The guards were uneasy by this time and drove the prisoners across the gang-plank into the hold of the barge at a run. My father wept as he trotted timidly across the gang-plank in the thick of the crowd. Kolya wept too as he lay face downwards collapsed over Boyo.

Boyo was still able to lift his head up from the peat dust beaten

up by the prisoners' feet, look round for his master but instead a lad with a shotgun then he took a fast quick look at those alert eyes of his at the point of a nearby island with sparse polar vegetation, the patch of grey sky beyond and the wall of trees the far side of the Yenisei, so tempting and so full of secrets that Bova loved to probe and always managed to put out. This dog that was born to share the life and work of men and who could not grasp why he had been killed, gave a hoarse whine and a deep sigh that wounded almost human and died as if regretting or condemning someone.

Without the slightest hesitation Kolya then took on himself the burden his father had never been willing to accept. In the hardships of the polar winter, in the dank damp autumn, in the dangerous floods when the spring thaw set in, the young lad would be out in the tundra, on land or on the water using his gun or fishnets to help his mother and make sure as best he could that the family was fed. Once he suddenly found himself face to face with a bear that had just come out of its lair. There was no time for him to reload his single-barrelled gun, so Kolya simply fired at the bear using small shot. While the blinded animal reeled about on the ground and roared trying to beat off the dog, the boy hid behind a tree, loaded a cartridge into his gun and came out to meet the bear that had charged towards him.

Igarka and was working as a taxi-driver: he had recently married but he did not mention either his wife or his work at all and spent he was still in the woods, on the river. The next day he dragged me off with him beyond the old town to the lakes and there—there was no denying we were both chips off the same block—we shot a fair number of ducks but could not reach them. It was a windless day and the lakes were thick with water-weeds: the waves could not drive the ducks to the shore. Without a second thought Kolya took off his boots and trousers and ran up his shirt half-way up his concave stomach with its distended navel left over from a childhood hernia. Into the water he ambled and I started cursing him, vowing I would never go anywhere near him again. The bed of those polar lakes underneath the loess and slime was nothing but ice all the year round and there our "mighty" lad just charging over it...

Yelping from the cold Kolya marched on regardless, further and further in. "It's no colder than usual." Then when he slipped I started shouting at him again and all he could come up with way of an answer was a local saying in praise of the skinny.

"Oo-oh!" gasped Kolya as he stumbled, burnt by the icy water he made for the bank then without finishing his chant, but he managed to grab a dozen or so birds all the same. Scorched red by the icy water and covered in duck-weed, slime and algae he began to hop round our campfire; when he had danced about for a while and started to dry off he suggested he ought to have another drink, maintaining that the water was only cold to begin with, but that on it was bearable, not too bad.

I shouted at him more fiercely than ever and Kolya abandoned his plan, albeit wistfully.

We waited for the wind to blow up and drive some ducks to the bank but our patience was rewarded with a storm. We waited out two days and nights with no supplies on the far bank of the Yenisei keeping ourselves going with duck baked without salt in the ashes of our campfire. There was so much about Kolya that reminded me of our lost father—his habits, his carefree manner, the stories he told that were always full of fun, his talk full of jokes and tricks and his behaviour as well: after going steady with me for over a year, he then married another whom he had spent more than three or four evenings with, apart from one long holiday ride into the countryside. His face was an exact replica of his father's but it was the light-hearted boyishness about him that over-

owed everything else. The childhood he had not had the chance to experience, the games and pranks he had not had time to play out were all bubbling away just beneath the surface and would still be doing that for the rest of his days... What Nature has decreed for each one of us is bound to come into its own sooner or later.

Kolya announced that he longed to go hunting in the tundra some time that winter. He got little pleasure from his work as a taxi-driver and found life in the town tedious. There was no one in dissuading him, that only made him more enthusiastic about the whole idea, there was plenty of his father's blood running through Kolya's veins.

When the trees had turned gold and I was speeding across clear skies in a large plane bound for Moscow, where I was to take up my literary studies, my young brother, Nikolai Petrov, set off with two companions for the Taimyr peninsula to hunt a polar fox in a sea-plane rattling away fit to burst through the clouds already heavy with snow. The plane stopped down on a boat-belly in a round nameless lake with gently sloping, almost bare banks, frightening away the flocks of ducks and geese. The hunters put together a raft of driftwood, unloaded their provisions and equipment on to it and made for the shore. The pilots, who had been shooting away to their heart's content, collected up the birds from the water, then shook hands with the three men eager to start their hunting expedition and flew off, afterwards arranging to return in mid-December on the same plane but fitted out with skins.

The old half-rotten cabin built many years before on the bank of the Dudypa, one of the Pyasina River's many tributaries, was in serious need of repair. Kolya's companions left him to throw out the nets and catch fish for bait and as food for them and the dogs, while they set to patching up the winter hut and making it habitable.

After setting up two pole-nets—one on the lake and the other opposite the hut on the Dudypa—Kolya embarked on digging a pit in which they planned to dump the fish they caught so that the stench from it might spread around and as far as possible. All the time he dug away at the pit Kolya was unable to keep away from the nets, he was dying to know what was in them. He went down to the Dudypa but there was no sign of the net. Luckily he had taken the trouble to tie one end fast to a stone on the bank, other-

The season had started well, there was no getting away from Kolya and his young companion Arkhip were in good luck their mood was almost mischievous. Whatever instructions their leader gave them, they would make off at top speed to carry them out. The older man of the three had been through a good deal of time, he had seen war service and spent some time in prison that part of the world near Lake Iyauno he had had to break through frozen earth in his time, he had made fishing trips as far as the mouth of the Yenisei and hunted nerpa and white sturgeon near Sopochny Ridge. He had tried a spell as captain of a boat but the work had not taken his fancy: it was cripples' work. He was used to life fraught with danger, his restless nature demanded movement, adventure and wide open spaces.

Excited at the thought of what lay ahead, the young hunter ran about in the tundra, rummaged about in the undergrowth went shooting on the lakes and fishing in the Dudypa River and sawed wood. Life for them was fun and jokes all the way and they failed to notice how their leader grew more and more gloomy and irritable each day. The lads used to play tricks on him: when he was about to sit down on a small block of wood, they would pull it away so that he fell flat on his back, which made the boys break into peals of laughter. Then they might hide his spoon or fill one of his home-rolled cigarettes with match-heads, so that when he went to smoke it, it flew out of his mouth like a rocket. In the evenings, which were growing longer and darker with each day that passed, Kolya and Arkhip used to spin yarns and day-dream out loud: "We'll bag our foxes, then fly back to Igarka and marry you off to a wench whose right thigh alone would fill the bed no more to mention the two-ton tits! Look the future bravely in the face there's no looking back now, what's behind you is all over with now, there's no use worrying..."

"And what about the trouble that lies ahead?" muttered their leader to himself. "Yes, lads, yes ... and how are you going to make out later?"

In the tundra the lemmings were dying by the hundreds: they were the smallest and most vicious animals to be found in the North, and no wonder, for any animal living in the tundra was ready to eat them, even a thick-lipped reindeer, if it got hold of any, would chew away at it without turning a hair; as for the polar fox lemmings were its staple diet. The dead lemmings floated down the river which explained why the fish in the

since after all he the leader was "mother" to them here and the whole point of having a "mother" around was that there should be a scapegoat for criticism and disappointments and someone to ward off danger from them and their abode.

"What if we stay?" echoed the leader and fell silent. The lad did not interrupt. There was no point in hurrying him. After taking a last drag at his home-rolled cigarette, the leader did not stamp it out as his young companions were in the habit of doing but spat on the stub and dropped it into a rusty tin-can like some kind of money-box. It was a time-honoured custom among travellers in those parts not merely to save every crust of bread to see them through the winter but every shred of tobacco as well. The leader got up and moved away from the stove, bent his head to avoid the ceiling, and his open, generous face looking down at them seemed overcooked, with its skin hanging in flabby folds. All at once the leader had turned into an old man. With a look that stemmed from the worries he would not mention the leader glanced over at the little window, the whiteness beyond it, the gentle ripples of the snows stretching into the limitless distance and he thought of the little cabin sailing as a lonely craft through an endless sea with no shore or shelter to offer—a void whichever way you looked! If you were to fall from the deck of that craft, then you would fall and fly on, on, on without end... "Who on earth could know, for animals, lads, are God's creatures. Perhaps they may still come?" The leader spoke in a tired voice as if he was discussing something not at all important, as if the main thing still remained unsaid. He stopped snapping at them, he did not even use the word "devil" any more: he was no longer moved by the same motives that had spurred him on in the past. "In '39 the polar foxes had simply come tripping through the villages and trading stations. In Igarka people used to find them by the rubbish dumps, women-stackers from the timber-yard had chased after the rascals between the stacks, knocking them dead with boards... One of Nature's riddles." The leader lay hunched up by the stove, wheezing away as he smoked. There was so much smoke in the hut that you could cut the air with a knife. "Well, if there aren't going to be any polar foxes... we could always shoot ourselves..."

"What does that mean?"

"Quite simply, with a gun." The leader scratched his head. "It's not for me to tell you how it happens. It is something which

stems from loneliness. We need to decide whether we are going to leave, and if so, then without delay, but if we stay then it's a different matter. You've got an evening to think about it. Go your separate ways and work it out for yourselves. Think really hard, lads, rack your brains, that is, if there's anything left to rack."

The whole of that evening the two lads wandered about in the tundra, and on into the night as well. The weather was ideal, windless, the prickly frost made their throat and nostrils tingle and their heads and hearts feel light. It was wonderful for bodies wearied by idleness to be able to move, slide and fly over the snow on skis; they could see so far into the distance that the earth really did seem to curve over at the horizon, and on the very edge of their globe the tips of the ice-covered cliffs by the sea sparkled like distant watch-towers. If the lads looked at them for long, then they began to move and disappear to nothing. The sun only came out briefly over those ice-bound cliffs along the coast, as if the sky had no more use for it. It hung there briefly and then disappeared. It did not set or fall away beyond the horizon, but literally disappeared: a narrow mouth of red light that opened briefly over the cliffs sucked it back like an old outworn dummy and that was all there was to it. Then the soundless scarlet slit, the cliffs and the white snows, over which a scrap of red sky flickered briefly and burnt itself out, were hidden from sight by the falling darkness.

The tundra was now engulfed in deep silence. The shadows, still motionless and noiseless, fell upon the tundra from above, squeezed out the light and dwarfed the open spaces. The winter huntsmen guessed that the sun had set till spring and their hearts missed a beat, the cold blast of a parting, the like of which they had never known, swept over them and an almost tangible feeling of hopelessness gripped them so that although they had been wandering about separately they suddenly decided as one: "We'll go!"

Then out in the tundra something moved, there was a rustle in the snow, life rippled through the space in front of them, here and there sparkles of light flared up and the sky, which had seemed dark, turbid and empty but a few moments before, suddenly opened wide to let forth flickering crystal-clear light. The lads' hearts were filled with fear and wonder. They ought to have made off, but they did not have sufficient power over themselves. Out in the sparkling tundra at night, leaning on a stick, there stood Kolya, there stood Arkhip, and by the hut the leader

two was looking out into the night and they were all at length bewildered as to whether to ask him what was happening to them, why they felt as they did.

The three hunters all returned to the hut at once at which it was late for men to be up and about in these parts. Out from them came the dog Shaburka whom they had named after their master in revenge for the fact that he had made the hunters go through the nose, exploiting their helpless situation. Drifted the last of the cold clear air, the two lads clambered back into the cabin and announced in one voice:

"We'll stay."

"Staying's the easier way, but take care you don't end up in trouble after all."

"Rubbish! We're not the first and we won't be the last. Why should we leave with nothing to show for our stay? Leave all our stuff behind and back out!"

"Haw now! The collective's decided. What the collective en- goes!"

After heating up some food the leader brought out a half-litre bottle of spirit and without saying anything poured out a full mugful and then took his knife out of its sheath, slashed at his hand and so diluted the spirit with blood. "Now he's off!" the two lads thought to themselves. Their faces fell and their skin grew over cold. The leader was taking leave of his senses. All these people who've been through the mull are not quite right in the head and it's anyone's guess what they'll think up next. He grabbed at Kolya's hand, took a quick slash at the lad's finger and squeezed out some of Kolya's blood as well into the mug.

Arkhip had turned white by this time and was backing toward the door so as to rush out of the hut, but he was too slow, the leader grabbed hold of him first and cut his finger as well.

The spirit had turned dark red from the blood and looked revolting. The two lads had come over all quiet waiting to see what would happen next. The leader smeared spirit over their cuts and told them to bandage them up. Then he lit a candle and after dripping wax from it in all four corners of the winter-cabin he muttered an uncanny spell. "Talk when times are good, seal lips when they are bad. I call on the thick forest and the great waters, my scarlet blood and that of my friends, my own pure sweat and my very living soul: glassy-eyed misery, scurvy plague of our bones, furies of hunger and cold—turn your back on us, pass us

sealed in blood, and is binding until death.

"It were best to take blood straight from our veins and drink it neat but I took pity on you and did not disfigure your young bodies..." At that the leader made the sign of the cross over the mug, grunted, breathing out as far as he could, poured the charmed potion into his mouth, which he then wiped with the back of his hand, and then chewed the limp tail of a dried fish to help it down. His young partners in conspiracy drank with horror the spirit that was pink from their blood, shivered as it went down and then crunched at some dried fish.

After waiting till they had got their breath back and eaten something to help the spirit down the leader went on to say. "You must also remember, lads, not to eat much salt, not to munch snow, go carefully when you make bread, don't spill the flour when you're baking. Keep the dog on strict rations. He's got a real general's gut already! Never forget for a moment that it is far more terrible to get lost in the tundra than in the taiga where man has never set foot before."

The spirit had mellowed the lads' mood, they felt light on heart for it had filled their veins with benign warmth.

"Come on now," they protested cutting the leader short, "that's enough laying down the law!"

The hours passed, turning into long days and the long days into still longer weeks. There was no trace of any polar foxes. They caught two common foxes in the traps, all skin and bone with the fur. A lost ermine wandered into their wood that was drowned in snow except for the prickly tops of the trees. Until the undergrowth was covered over by the snow they caught a good haul of partridges. But then came the snow-storms and that put an end to all their activities. The arctic owls provided their next diversion. They would stick a pole or stick into the snow and fix a trap onto the top of it. The owls could see at night and in the snow-storms and they would never fly past any landmark sticking out from the snow: they too liked the chance to sit on something firm and preen themselves. So they would eat owls: it was not the same thing as partridge of course, for it had a bitter taste and smelt of burnt sheepskin or mouse but when it came to their down, that was light and frothy. How the womenfolk would have loved it, but where had they all got to?

Winter descended for once and all along the Pyasina and

leader leapt over to the door and seized them by their padded jackets.

"Stupes!" he roared, beside himself by now. "So you want to be dug out of the snow all pretty and white?" He pushed the two men back towards the bunks and then kicked them, not enough to hurt but in a real frenzy; then he started cursing them as if they were no more than stupid little boys and he was soon so carried away by his own invective that he drove Arkhip to lose his temper. Arkhip glowered across the cabin, snorted and without a word bore down upon the leader.

Like mortal enemies, the two hunters collided in the middle of the cabin, caught hold of each other, tore each other's shirts to shreds in seconds flat, snarled like dogs, grabbed at each other's throats, scratched and lashed out at each other in complete disorder. Blood was spurting everywhere. The smell of blood filled the cabin with the smell of it.

"You clods!" shouted Kolya.

Yet what could that poor fellow do?

Between those two hulky fellows he was like a fly.

Another so hard that their heads were split.

Bare to the waist and

grappling in silence: no

and snarling of two wild

The lamp fell over and

darkness, the wind was

two hunters raged on

"You clods!" shot

started to cry in disgust

Help!"

There was a sudden

fell out and filled the cabin

the stove and immediately

their senses by the new

the kettle over the stove

"Blockheads! You

them through his tears.

"I then what?"

red

his voice.



where he started working as a driver for the local fishing cooperative.

One year I set off to visit my brother with my whole family. On previous occasions he was most active and helpful with pleasure for himself. He had no complaints when it came to health, went out of his way to please everybody and indeed make them all happy with his warm welcome. Knowing that I was a keen fisherman, he promised to take me and my sons to the Opankha River to let me fish for grayling to my heart's content.

THE DEWDROP

Entice us with the Opankha though he did, Kolya was in a hurry to get started. "Wait till Akim shows up, then we'll be off," he declared. Time and again he would dash off to the wharf on the bank of the Yenisei.

Akim, my brother's bosom friend, had gone to Yeniseisk to sign up with the forest-fire fighters, and I guessed he was not actively squandering his advance because he didn't like carrying money on him.

So I whiled away the time in the vicinity of the settlement on the pebbly promontory of Kerosinka, so named because this was where the sovkhos had put up its fuel storage tanks, angling and hooking a lot of perky bream and perch, white-bellied, gray-striped impudent rascals all. The only ones who were quicker than these were the ruffs who would let no other fish anywhere near their feed. In the daytime we swam and baked in the sun, now in sultry primer: the summer that year was a scorcher even up north. Of course, this was no Black Sea, but even so you could take a dip in the water.

Whether it was on account of my sedentary work, or because I had given up smoking, or simply because I had taken after my great-grandfather, who, my aunts assert, was pot-bellied, but had grown fat to the point where I was self-conscious about the fact and so took my swims as far out of eyeshot as possible. Standing there on the promontory in my trunks, eyes fixed on the rods, I suddenly heard

"F-g-h it! Think of all the food that goesh into that! Shum belly you got there, pana! Real farsbum!" Paddling down the Yenisei was a young fellow with fair, scanty hair, squinting eyes and a totally artless smile on his thin, windbeaten face. I guessed who he was from the word "pana" and the specific accent of a "herringer", a native of the lower reaches of the Yenisei.

"You're a tight-heeled herringer, you, who guzzles licker on an empty stomach! That's why your belly is glued to your back!"

The fellow pulled up to the shore, moored his boat and proffered me his hand, a gesture typical of someone who seldom sees other people. His securing the boat was another ingrained herringer habit: when a northerly wind blows the river swells imperceptibly, and an unsecured craft may easily be set adrift.

"How come you know I'm a herringer, pana?" His palm was rough and wiry, the whole of him lean, un-toed, but of sturdy build.

"I know all about you. Drunk away your advance in Yeniseisk, haven't you?"

Akim blinked his narrow eyes in surprise and sighed ruefully.

"That I have, pana. The advansh and the gun too."

"The gun?! Why, they used to flog hunters for drinking away their guns. A peasant for his horse, a hunter for his gun."

"Who'll do the floggin' now? There wash a revolution, pana, we got freedom!" Akim guffawed, then breezily ordered "Wind up your rods!"

So here we were making our way down the Yenisei, heading for the unfamiliar Opanikha River. The boat, my brother's, was equipped with an ancient stationary engine that chugged loudly, gave off clouds of evil-smelling smoke and sped along at "seven kilometres a week, the bushes just flashing by". Still, there's good in the bad and bad in the good—at that pace I had all the time I needed to enjoy the river and the talk with my brother and his crony. The two call themselves khanunks, the Siberian colloquialism for happy-go-lucky drunks, and the word, the sound and the sense and the feel of it, fitted both as neatly as a building brick fits into a brick stove.

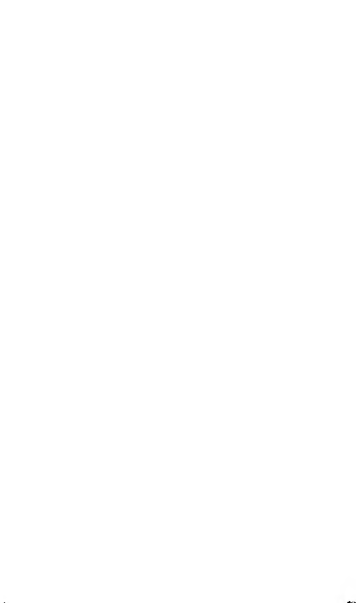
Akim was sitting at the rudder, he wore jackboots, an unbuttoned quilted jacket, a cap pulled well-nigh down to the nose, and sucking on a wet cigarette. Kolya was booted and wore a quilted

standing in "the run out of worms" (2nd), how to catch them, please?"

Leaving his net, which was furnished with a fine cork the better to see when the fish bit, my brother took to the basket where they had thrown down all that I hooked this way and that—there wasn't a single worm in the basket! You can't dig any in the tops—what worm can do the mess, the slump, and, in places, the petrification! He led on their fishing, then. All that labour and effort were sucked valdely pills, his eyes had almost popped out of sockets as they dragged the boat upstream, and now that the disaster of a lifetime, the end of the world!

"Akim, you bastard! Somebody's wiped all the worms!" "What?! What?! It can't be, pona!" Akim bellowed hopped shoreward from stone to stone, slipped, and crashed first into the river, his boots taking in water to overflow! shook the basket, fingered it, poked his face into it—damn no worms. Kolya's lips had turned black from the shock of it.

"How can that be? How can that be?" Akim repeated, sobbing. "Shwindled! Shwindled by them bloody *lennhals*! Friends them, you nice to them..." He stopped short as he saw a black woodpecker sitting on a stump and cleaning its beak. Another one farther away, bulletheads they were, husband and wife, evidently. Both so smug, so content. They'd spruced up! were now settling down for a nap after lunch. Back there in stream Akim had heard them calling each other, each anxiously, then squawking fit to bring the forest down, the song they have when they've feasted and are happy. "Cannibals! Wreckers! Primpin' yourselves now, huh?!" Akim grabbed his gun and let fly at the woodpecker with a blast of buckshot. close range, taking the poor bird's head off its body. The other bullethead let out a loud, plaintive shriek and made for the top of a ball of black in the sky. Akim, as if smashing the bird with his shot was not enough, picked it up by the wing and hurled it into the water like a rag. Kolya waved his hands in the air, groaned, spat out a valdely pill and tumbled into the river after the woodpecker. "He's a goner!" Akim thought, horrorstricken. "Clean done for himself!" He was on the point of jumping into the river to the rescue, but Kolya, wading here and swimming there, caught up with the woodpecker, retrieved it and stepped ashore with the words: "Here they are! Here they are!"



I hadn't even completed the thought when suddenly there came a cry.

"Got one!" The jerry-rigged rod which my brother had just cut down was bending double under the weight of a big grayling.

We all hurried to unwind our rods and bait our hooks and a minute later I heard a gurgle, a splash and saw the vivid gleam of a grayling my son was pulling from under an uprooted, well-logged aspen tree. I went numb all over: it was a steep, boggy bank and the boy had never before caught a grayling of that size, though he knew well enough how to handle them. He lifted the fish out of the water but forgot that what he had in his hand now was only a sappy birdcherry branch instead of the sturdy bamboo rod he was used to—the fish jerked and writhed and the line aswinging, hit a bush and fell off the hook into the water. Surfacing wildly, the grayling slapped the water with its flat tail and made off.

I unleashed a torrent of hard words, among which "clod" was perhaps the kindest, on my offspring's head. Akim, standing on the opposite bank, felt sorry for the lad and interceded on his behalf.

"What you dressin' down the boy for? There's no call for it. We'll hook lots more!" and forthwith jerked a silvery grayling ashore. "There, you see?!"

And me thinking that with his tackle he wouldn't catch a thing—the rod as stout as a shaft, the line—they don't sell any thicker, the plastic float as big as a cucumber, the hook fit only for the wide maw of a burbot. I cut short my mirage and went to look for a "good" spot, the kind that if you don't find it on a Ural stream, for instance, means you'll catch no grayling. Over there the wretch has been driven into a corner and is by now so terror-crazed, so nervous and wary he'll put on his glasses, look and sniff around before taking the bait and then whisk under a snag like some worthless barbel or bleak.

Long ago an undermined cedar had fallen into the river bringing down with it several rowan trees and a pussy willow. The pile had formed a beaver dam of sorts, and where the water ruffled the tops of the trees a whirlpool was spinning. There must surely be fish here because it was a good place to hide in and pounce on your prey from cover, but the craftiest, the most voracious fish must, in my opinion, lurk around or, rather, under

shrubby, the crocuses, most of which had shed their petals, bloomed their last glowing farewell in the mud shade, the perennials on the other hand, were in their lusty prime; cactus like Venus's slippers and the heart-curing water-green were flowering everywhere, and in the ravines where the snow had held the longest the wind-anemones and crystalines stood by drooping. Hurrying to replace them was the enduring knot of the serrate leaves of the snake-grass brooded in the forest. Penetrating the fluvial lowlands, ravines and promontories with its dense, penetrating into the shade of the conifers under which foxberries, star-flowers, stonecrops and evil-smelling berberis were flowering their last, the summer, always late to reach its parts, was fighting its way up the Opankha into the thick forests still stunned by the winter's frost and snow.

The going became easier. The blackwoods, purple with sweetbriars, hawthorns and all manner of other shrubs, frustrated by the enormity and impenetrability of the tangle, stopped their advance and began instead a stealthy infiltration into the humorous stillness of the thick-growing forest only along game animal paths and clearings caused by forest fires.

Ever more often now the Opankha would steeply rise or fall into a loop, beyond each loop was a shoal and beyond the shoal a reach or an eddy.

We wandered from promontory to promontory, and the shore boots some of us were wearing took in water, a number of scalding-cold water to translucent that where it looked ankle-deep you tumbled in up to the waist. Kolya proposed that we stop and cook our fish soup because the sun stood high in the sky, it was hot and stuffy and breathing had become a laborious exercise what with our clothes all buttoned up against the mosquitoes. The brutes had feasted so sumptuously on the sly that my face was burning, there was a swelling behind both ears, my neck ached and my hands were blood-smeared from wrist to fingers.

We came upon a pile of fallen trees.

"Further'n this," said Kolya, "no local tramp has ever made it in the summer." He called out to Akim.

There was no reply.

"The maral! The tramp! He'll run the lad off his feet and drive Tarzan half dead."

The awesome pile-up—so old and craggy and layered that an occasional alder sprouted out of its marrow, young bird-cherry

used derring-herringers can put away, we went on for ever.

Akim quickly and deftly sealed and disemboweled the entire catch. I thought he was going to salt the fish in a wooden spoon, but having boiled the water with some potatoes he dumped the whole lot into the bucket and pushed them down a stick to keep the tails from getting burnt.

"What are we going to do with so much?"

"Gonna eat it, never fear. Done shum walkin', now we're vin'."

That was a fish soup! To be frank, there wasn't much left in the bucket, it was all pure fat. My son is good at catching fish but eats it reluctantly. The best I could do, not being accustomed to fish in plentiful supply, was five modest-sized tender portions after which I gave up.

"Huh! Shum eater!" Akim scoffed. "How you shupport a bel like that?"

The two herringers laid the fish out on a raincoat, salted profusely and, spicing each mouthful with a bite of wild onion, unhurriedly disposed of the entire catch down to the last bone and even sucked all the heads dry. Unbelieving, I gave the pair a new hard look: where had they stuffed all that fish? After washing the meal down with five mugs of tea apiece, and giving each other a wink, the herringers summed up:

"Nice little snack, thank God. Now we're on equal terms with the hungry. Did our cooking while nobody was looking."

"That was a performance that was!"

"Grew up on fish," said Kolya, gathering up the spoons. "I used to reduce us to such straits that, believe it or not, we chewed fish without bread or salt, like grass..."

"Oh, I believe you. After all, I'm related to our dad too..."

Akim, sensing that we were slipping into sad remembrances of the past, lifted himself off the ground, yawned mightily, snatched off the end of his rod, wound his line around it, then stuffed some redundant gear into his pack. He wished "a lig on such fishin'" declared that the boat couldn't be left untended all night, and headed back for the Yenisei.

We talked on awhile, sitting round a dying camp-fire but soon got to our feet and wandered off up the Opankha. The further we went the better became the fishing, only much of our zeal and elation had worn off. Kolya took my brief-case and handed me his pack and I stood the bucket in it so as not to mess up the

complaint to our trade union.

Kolya pulled himself a sandbank and fell flat down on it. There was no breeze, so thick was the taiga around us, but still there was a certain coolness in the valley of the cragily meandering river. Barely perceptible movement of the air carried our last, so to speak, breath, as it were, of a taiga drunk with the blossoming of bluebird-cherry, groundwort, peonies and brackens.

Downstream from the promontory, hard by an uprooted cedar standing like a dinosaur on its hind legs in the water, a narrow eddy was spinning, and over it loomed the thin figure of a fisherman—three times he had hooked and lost "a whopper of a fish" here.

I called out to the lad and he parted reluctantly with his uncaught grayling. Together we toppled a watered cedar and hacked it into firewood with an axe. Soon the water, seasoned with currant leaves and strong, factory-produced tea, came to the boil. My brother lay there, face down on the sandbank, not stirring. I poured some tea into a mug and touched his shoulder.

"Okay, okay," he responded without turning his head and continued in his recumbent position for a while harking to his inner being. He raised himself with some difficulty, rubbed the left side of his chest with a palm. "She lures you in, does Mother Taiga, she gives you her breast and you suck it like a hungry babe and bite your tongue off..."

The tea perked Kolya up. He lay down on his side, rested his

What did I feel there on the Oparikha by a lonely fire fl like a tailed comet in the dark of the forest beside a stream raced crazily by day and now, at night, subsided woman-like a muted whisper?

Everything. And nothing.

Back home you go sour beside the steam radiator and dreaming, come spring, come summer, I'll wander off into forest and there see this and feel that... All of us Russians something of the child in us down to our old age, ah hankering for a present, for a fairy-tale, for something extraordinary to warm, nay, to sear our soul, a soul encrusted in a of callousness yet vulnerable inside and which even in an worn-out, tormented body often manages to retain its fledgling fluff

Was it not this expectation of the unusual, of the eternal fairy-tale, was it not this thirsting for a miracle that had brought my brother to the Taimyr tundra, the Dudypa River where he fell prey to quite a real sickness and yearning—a gift a local Sorceress. And what had driven us here, to the banks the Oparikha? Certainly not a desire to feed the mosquitoes. It hum and swarm the thicker around us the darker the night grows. It is not just a grey cloud of gnats that is visible in the reflection of the fire that skim across the water, but a putty-like dough that whisks itself without a churn-staff, swelling as with heaven and scattering yellow bran into the fire.

Kolya and my boy had their hands tucked under them and were twitching and kicking in their sleep. The dogs had moved closer to the fire. After washing the sweat off my face in the river I smeared it with a thick coat of repudin (if paradise existed I would have requested those in charge to reserve their best beer for the man who invented the antimosquito ointment). The number of the gnats always find a spot where to suck blood, and now and again one of these long-nosed beasts, glugged with drink separates its ponderous self from my body with a resounding "zzing"... But in spite of all that, you can still breathe and observe and listen and live, so what is a painful sting compared to the peace and serenity in your heart that we call by the outmoded word "bliss"?

A fog appeared over the river only to be snatched up by eddies and currents that dragged it along the water, impaled it on the fallen trees, furled it into rollers and drove it over the short, foam-

The half moon flashed briefly like a silver grey
 five tops, caught on the tip of a tall spruce and
 fathoming depths of the forest without a sound. I
 stars in the sky thickened, darker grew the
 shadows cast by the trees while the moon was up.
 Only the Opunkha kept gleaming over the shoals &
 the Yenwei along the snaky furrow it had ploughed.
 Here it would overflow its sloping bank, split into
 channels, into a frayed broom, as it were, whose
 would then proceed to tickle the cumbrous mighty
 in timid flirtation. Slowing his pace slightly around
 white stone spit, churning his heavy waters, Old
 here accepted another stream into his bosom, knots
 big tangle with the supple, clear rivers and rivulets that
 to him for hundreds and thousands of kilometres, drop
 restless impetus of perpetual motion to add their youthful
 drop by drop, to the perpetual motion of the great river.

The stillness that prevailed was such that a deep
 seemed inconceivable, yet somehow, somewhere, no
 ears, not with the body, but with the soul of nature
 within me too, I sensed the apex of that stillness, the
 crown of the emerging infant day—the moment had on
 as they said in the old days, only the Spirit of God born
 the earth.

On the tapering tip of an oblong willow leaf, as
 dewdrop collected, swelled into a clot of latent energy, as
 there lest it bring the world down with its fall.
 I too froze.

This was how the artilleryman at the front behind his gun
 to freeze, taut lanyard in hand, waiting for the voice that
 give the order, a feeble human voice but an awesome power
 the lord of the weapon and the fire that he, the human
 himself invented. Deified in ancient times, then transformed
 a destructive whirlwind, fire is the force that lifted man up
 all fours and made him into the most rational of rational beings
 yet it has come to serve as an avenging hand punishing that
 man. Of all the words I know there is for me none more terrible
 and more fascinating than the word "fire!"

The dewdrop hung heavy and transparent above my head. The
 willow leaf held it in check in its groove, and the weight of the
 drop could not at least not yet, overcome the resilient tension

But the time must come when they will abide alone, in dread and wondrous world, and there will be nobody, or not anybody else, to protect them, to keep them warm.

How often we throw exalted words about without thinking their meaning. We keep harping, for example: children are happiness, our joy, children are the apple of our eye... But children are our anguish too! Our eternal worry! Something we are judged by. A mirror in which our conscience, intelligence, integrity are reflected stark naked for all to see. Children are us for a shield, we them—never. And this: no matter how clever, how strong they are, our children always need protection. It hurts to think that you will soon die, and I will be left alone in the world: who but their father and mother knows them the way they really are? Who will accept it with all their faults? Who will offer them understanding, forgiveness?

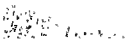
And that drop!

What if it comes tumbling down to the ground? Oh, if only were possible to bring peace to your heart knowing you will leave them in a peaceful world!

But the drop, the drop!...

I clasped my hands behind my neck. High, high in the grey sky beginning to pale over the not too distant Yenisei, I discerned the twinkling stars the size of a bead-ruby seed. The stars always evoke in me a sad, sucking feeling of inner peace by their icon-like flicker, their unfathomability, their remoteness. When I hear the words "the other world" I envision not the afterworld, not a black void, but these little, blinking, distant stars. Strange that the feeble, faraway light should fill my soul with a sorrowful tranquillity. But then, what is so strange about it? I have learnt with the years that joy is brief, transient, often deceptive, and that sorrow is eternal, beneficial, unchanging. Joy is a flash of sunshine, no, a bolt of lightning that erupts suddenly and retreats in rolling thunder. Sorrow glows soft and silent like an inscrutable star, but its light never fades in the soul, night or day, it is a light that brings your near and dear ones to mind, arouses a thirst for affection and evokes dreams of the unknown, be it the ever sweet, poignant past or the enticing, uncertain, fear-inspiring future. Wise and mature is sorrow, it is millions of years old, but joy is a child in years and in aspect because in every human being it is born anew and the further on in life the less there is of it. Like





shut her eyes in dreamy languor—she was hatching a new brood of chicks.

Not far from the stump with the nest, a maral and her calf passed slowly by. Twitching her ears, she poked the ground and the foliage with her nose, now and then picking off a leaf or two not so much to feed herself as to show the youngling how it is done. An elk wandered into the Oparikha upstream from our camp chewing leaves and water grass, and what scraps he dropped were carried away by the river. Lilac-hued toy cones had swollen in the branches of the cedar; in a month or two they would grow into big bristly cones with lacquer-yellow nuts within. A jay flew in, unscrewed and tore down a cedar cone, made off for the bushes and there began to squawk in an ugly voice inconsistent with her exotic, parrot-like beauty. The clamour or, perhaps, the shadow of the jay, a plunderer capable of devouring the eggs and nestlings of other birds and even the brood-hen herself, startled amid the pebbles a plover who scurried down to the river and either drank some water or looked herself over in it. At the same moment a grey wagtail whirled up from ambush, snapped at a mosquito or mayfly on the wing and decamped into some long-bodied flowers on crimson stems to partake of the captured prey. In leaf, colour and overall appearance these flowers resemble lilies-of-the-valley, only how could there be a lily-of-the-valley in these parts? Wild garlic, that's what they are, of course! Everywhere else this plant has lost their resiliency and hardened, but here on a shady river bank in the heart of the taiga it is fresh and succulent, fed by the juices of the sunsoftened permafrost. I can see little crystals of permafrost twinkling in a thawed piece of ground on the other bank, I can see the lilac-hued cones in the cedars, and a wagtail feeding, a woodcock springing up, and snow-birds flickering like balls of white in the trees.

Meaning?

Meaning morning is come!

I hadn't noticed its stealthy onset, had missed it completely. The darkness paled and melted away, the mists floated off somewhere and the forest, designated by a motley array of tree trunks, loomed into view. The owl that kept shuffling over the river in the dead of night and shying jerkily away from our fire each time she pawed over it now groped her way into a purple willow, fixed her blind gaze on our camp and began to fluff and dangle before my very eyes by drawing in her feathers.

know, that I couldn't, 'cos I'd not eaten nothing, you know. All my cash goes on fines. Yap-ya-ap!"

When we were about to get into the plane he was still playing in the gallery. After finishing his bottle he grew even more talkative, even more of a nuisance. He stuck a dandelion in the button hole of his padded jacket and made up to the splendid dark-haired woman with an extravagant compliment: "Your eyes are like diamonds, except that they don't come to life!" Then he pointed at his flower to show he was a suitor ready to woo her.

She cut him short, albeit in a mild tone: "You wouldn't last the night out—I'd wear you to a frazzle!"

As is often the case in such remote, almost forgotten airports, the passengers were kept waiting. The pilots are weighed down as it were by their own importance and if they do not lead people a dance, then they would lose face as it were. The runways were on low ground, while all round the airport all that could be seen were swamps and occasional bushes. After the long steamy shower the mosquitoes were eating people for all they were worth. Our resident jokester did not get bitten since his whole body was soaked through with spint, as he hurried to explain, his leathery tongue rattling round his mouth and making fun of the women as they slapped their calves, jammed their legs tight together, or, the bolder among them, started driving the little beasts out from under their skirts.

"Oh, how they bi-ite! They're killing! The clever beasts! They know where to find the tastiest meal!"

"You idiot! You just wait till I thrash you one, it'll throw you right over!" the young woman pitched in. "What a place to pick for your filthy talk! With young kids round you, and you mittle on with all that filth!"

"You win, I'll belt up!" The little fellow raised his hands in surrender, hands that were pitted, scratched and dirty. "Just how does your husband put up with you?"

"It's me that has all the trouble to put up with! What a bloodsucker he is! What you all need is a millstone round your neck and splash into the Yemsee!" Without turning to anyone in particular she went on in a loud voice: "What's there to say about him! Drinks too much, eats too much, and is as tough as an ox and hot-blooded, always on the look-out for a fight. He's afraid to touch me because he knows I can beat back! So the great big swine has to go and lay into a little fellow and half kill him. Now

hostel of the Literary Institute!—some of the metropolitan manners had rubbed off on me and as a result found myself without seat. The plane was here, I was here, I had a ticket but there was no seat: the explanation was very simple—the pilots had given lift to a girl they knew from Choosh and deliberately “failed” to notice me. I had to stand the whole way in the middle of the plane between the seats, holding on to the luggage rack. I never hoped that it really would happen, but just for fun started wondering if any of those young men might offer me his seat, albeit for the second half of the journey? They must have noticed my war scars without having to look twice as the saying goes, but the only remark thrown in my direction was: “There’s no end to those educated devils around here, but there aren’t enough seats! Yap-ya-ap!”

The stupid little fellow would have gone on spouting nonsense if it had not been for the co-pilot who looked in through the open door of the plane, reluctantly pulled himself up, approached the gabby passenger and said: “If you’re going to lead people a dance, I’ll turf you out without a parachute!...”

The pilot fixed a narrow strap between the rows of seats which looked rather like a saddle-girth and gave a nod in my direction to indicate most likely that I could sit down on it. I thanked him politely. “Make yourself comfortable,” the pilot said abruptly and went back into the cockpit.

The noisy little fellow quietened down obediently. His scrawny neck with its criss-cross of veins snapped and his head that reminded me of a turnip fell back between his seat and the side of the plane, lolling to and fro and banging against the wall.

The other passengers were all half asleep by this time as well. The plane was flying at a low altitude and was chugging away soothingly though loudly, with its own special rhythm: when it slumped down low and let out a long groan as it climbed up again to its former height, it seemed to give an apologetic grunt and rattle, as if it was shaking off a troublesome cloud as it flew, before starting another climb.

I made the most of the lull and got my breath back so to speak: there is no denying how tiresome drunks can be when they start hanging on to you like leeches, and how embarrassing it can be to have to look at and listen to fellows past caring about anything, especially the elderly variety, worn out by the lives they have led and intent on exhibiting what fools they are.

so as to be able to wave to our plane. I could not help to how our familiar world defies our imagination at every turn its contrasts—far and near, eternal and transient, fear and sympathy ..

"Hallo there!" I came down to earth and realised the woman was pulling at my sleeve. Throughout the journey I had been sitting with her eyes shut, her large red hands folded on her knees: those hands meant she must work with livestock and timber down the river. "Have a seat!" she offered in a voice reminding me of hospitalists and started to get up. "Your legs must be quite numb, aren't they?"

"Thank you, thank you!" I put my hand on her shoulder to stop her rising, and then, so as not to hurt her by my refusal, added with a friendly smile: "I have to sit down all the time at work."

"I see..." she replied, smiling in her turn, "are you coming here for a holiday or to work for a bit?"

I told her why I was flying there and she came over all smiles: "I know that brother of yours. He used to be one of our drivers on the farm. He's got really thin, horribly thin. Will you recognise him, I wonder?"

Thanks to the experience of disasters and bereavement she had gleaned over the years and to her feminine intuition she did not trouble me with any more talk or questions, but just shut her mouth again, relishing the rare peace and quiet, while more likely I was not she was grieving to herself about her own troubles.

The plane hummed and rocked and the iron door rattled. Suddenly it swooped round as if specially to grant me a last glimpse at the river and the earth below, but by this time it was already leaning over to one side so that the sky seemed to be just out of the window, as if all we would need to do would be to stretch out a hand to grasp a handful of cottonwool from the nearest cloud. The plane came full circle and then slid down to the Choosh settlement.

From the air Choosh was like all the settlements built along the Yenisei, its buildings untidily scattered, its roads full of rubbish and litter and treeless: if it had not been for the cluster of poplars in the middle of the village I would never have recognised it. Round the village and then out beyond the river, in the estuary ran the local aerodrome, churned up by caterpillar wheels next to a small

ing overgrown with buttercups, charlock and dandelions. It consisted of a small wooden building, a simple control tower and rows of lights to mark the runway. Cows, calves and horses grazing in the clearing and when our little plane came down and from the Yenisei side with its nose trained between the of runway markers almost hidden in the grass, a young lad along in front of the plane for a long time in a flapping berry-pink shirt, driving a skewbald cow from the runway a brushwood switch. It looked as if the plane would hit the whose running was hindered by its bulging udder that veered from side to side, bump into her just beneath her frisky, rmed tail but everything turned out all right in the end, most ably the boy, the cow and the pilots were used to everything in Choosh and even found the whole chase amusing and e a sport of it.

came out of the plane straight after the pilot who wore his cap complete with badge pulled down over his right temple ost over his eye as he looked straight out through the crowd the space beyond confident in view of past experience that attire would produce the desired effect. The second pilot ght out the little fellow with the big mouth tucked under his He had been sleeping away to his heart's content and was not awake enough to understand what was happening. He grabbed at the seat in front of him, muttered away and got his tangled up in knots. The pilot shoved him out of the plane ding with a bump in the grass the little fellow yelped in rest, came to his senses and demanded his headgear in mptory fashion. The pilot groped around under the seat and w out his squashed cloth cap. After beating it against his knee, little fellow pushed his fist up into the middle to reshape it and t on back to front.

on the way into the settlement from the aerodrome he stopped very house giving a detailed account of his trial, how things turned out, how decently and even heroically he had behaved e trial and what a wonderful spree he had had in Yeniseisk to prate. Near the old wooden hut stood a woman in an old et with a brownish, wide-boned face. While waiting for her and who was obviously not hurrying home she held at the ly a green stick from a bird-cherry tree.

"Little Lady! Little Lady!" she called "Come over here, come now, I've got something for you!..."

The little fellow had been given this strange nickname account of his odd laughter. On hearing that laughter outside the house one of the local farmers started shouting, thinking it came from his mongrel dog. "Quiet, Little Lady! Quiet, if nothing to make a noise about! Who d'you think you're bawling at?"

It would seem that Little Lady's appearance in Choosh indeed in the world at large, had been a mistake. In the first his mother conceived him after miscalculating her dates and the second a revision in the timetable let him down. While en route to Igarka where he had got a job, Little Lady got drunk on way and worked through his severance allowance. In Choosh he ran ashore to buy some wine without saying anything to any one and started chatting in the queue and then missed the boat because the captain decided to cut short their stay in the settlement. His wretched wife went back to Choosh on a local motor-launch, without saying a word brought out a log and laid into her husband till she was totally exhausted. After putting her head back in the log-pile, she kicked her husband, sat down on the wood-pile and started lamenting her bitter fate out loud to all the strangers who went by.

Little Lady suited the colourful population of Choosh down to the ground, since he was always unlucky he could not possibly be a threat to the other people in Choosh from the profit angle. He added something fresh to the grim, secretive crowd in the settlement through his light-hearted disposition and nonchalant approach to wealth. Little Lady was despised but tolerated in the settlement he provided other people with a source of amusement. He, like everyone else, was seen as slow-witted, incapable of running his own life, making the most of opportunities, grabbing what was available and bringing things home safe to his house cellar or the ice-pit to be found in almost every household of Choosh.

The Choosh settlement was not the most suitable place for Akim and Kadya, nor did they really suit the village, being of a hot, strong yet homesick disposition. However fate decreed otherwise, deciding that the noisy and high handed family of Kadya was (a family in which the two strapping sons were serving a term for being wrong) should be natives of this particular village and hence stay.

As soon as the nephews were playing ball near the house they found

dwelted and that was why he in his turn had loved to dream so passionately, at times almost blindly and to them, as if he had been making up to them for the love he received or sensed that they would have to grow up a father, or perhaps to experience a life like his own, from place to place, undermining their health, and even ways in life?

In the evening when someone came from the local doctor give Kolya a painkiller injection, he said to Alim: "Of Vitya lives the Yenisei. There's no point in staying here. His lips quivered and he turned away, he hated breed state, all weak and helpless. If he had been his usual obliging self he would have taken us down the river in a boat into the wind and waves, and to the Opankha River perhaps.

On a small hill near the shop by the name of "Color" which some dilapidated steps led down to the largest cluster of young people had gathered—the cream of the community? Some of the older inhabitants had tried a previous visit to explain the derivation of the serd name—Choosh. On the Ob near the place where the Sym rises and flows into the Yenisei the local fishermen like a fresh sterlet: they cut it up when it is virtually still alive, add salt and pepper on it and gulp it down with their vodka—a simple dish was known as *choosh*. Was it perhaps from the delicacy that the name had come, who knows? However, locals in Choosh itself did not eat the dish in question, they put sterlet in light brine. Further North people eat fish raw or when it has just been caught, and most popular of all are of white fish and salmon. It is more likely that the village's name derived from the strident call of the black-grouse: "Choo-fy" which from a distance would have merged into the single sound "Choosh, choo-ooosh", for at one time the River Sym had been the extreme limit of cultivation in the Yenisei valley and there had been so many of the black-grouse near the corn-fields that the would have been filled with those cries. Whatever the source it have been, the name of the old village was something you could not help noticing right away and remembering for the rest of your days.

Moving up or down the river from the settlement there were two streams that separated it from the meadows, fields, swamps and lakes: one used to dry up in the summer and the other was

ocked off by a small dam to provide water for putting out fires kind which collected a stinking morass. People used to throw tips of bark, wood chippings, dead dogs, tin cans, rags and paper to the putrid pond—any sort of rubbish that came to hand.

In the centre of the settlement near those very same poplars which were the first landmark, by which Choosh could be recognised whether approached from the air or the river, a dance floor had been botched together underneath which chickens laid eggs and the local drunks crawled underneath it on their stomachs to roll them out to use as blotting-paper. In the tall weeds growing in the corners of the broken railings, hemming in the territory referred to as the "park", chickens even used to hatch out their chicks: at one time there had even been gates leading into the "park", tickets had been sold for dancing, but it did not really catch on, no one wanted to spend money on tickets, and going against all the rules, the local lads used to jump over the railings and then pull their dancing partners over after them.

So the dancing stopped and the music died away. Someone removed the painted gates bearing the word "Welcome!" to chop up as firewood. The social life of the settlement suffered a major blow. The park was soon taken over by goats, pigs, hens, and the local children used to play hide-and-seek in it. In the late evenings under those poplars there were giggles and heavy breathing to be heard, and one could marvel at the variety of coloured, nylon drawers and be dazzled at the chaste freshness of naked, liberated bodies. Out there in the summer despite the mosquitoes the nights were radiant, warm and just right for amorous escapades.

The park if viewed from the river or the landing-stage provided something in the way of a back-drop for the village complete with its poplars, burdocks and odd patch of intact railings, with the little circle of its deserted dance-floor. On the left at the top of the steep bank could be seen the raised plank roof of the canteen, next to which stood a building equipped with a mast and a cluster of wires threaded through specially drilled holes. That was the radio transmitter point on the landing-stage and to it was attached a notice which read: "No entry for unauthorised persons." However inside, the office was always full of smoke and dust and people, with nothing to do, were always hanging about thereafter getting off a steamer or while waiting for one, because the landing-stage was sealed off at night and the skipper and his wife, in an effort to maintain order and cleanliness, used to chase

people away pretending that they were trying to combat vagrancy and turn off all the lights except the signals for the ships, only relenting to give passengers access to the ticket office, the left luggage and the scales half an hour before the boats arrived.

On the right, on that same steep bank overlooking the channel that a dried up stream had carved for itself, on a hillock trod bare by countless feet and reminiscent of the hummock of earth on top of a new grave there stood a dark forbidding building, that pigs had tunnelled under with their snouts; its shutters were closed and its doors were sealed off with a broad iron bar which one could have taken for a shooting target so riddled was it with nail heads. It was the shop, known as "Cedar", the most mysterious of all institutions in the Choosh settlement. In some respects it was like an unused church—gloomy, cold and deaf to man's prayers. However the fresh white notices fixed to the doors with large nails and the light that could be seen through the cracks showed that the establishment was alive and well.

I had made two visits to Choosh and only once had I found "Cedar" open. On all the other occasions I had just seen rows of notices stuck to the doors of the shop resembling medical certificates for a mortally ill creature. First came short somewhat peremptory announcements: "Closed for cleaning". Then there followed others more closely linked to the retail trade: "Repriending". Next, by way of a brief sigh of relief, came: "Stock-taking" and after a short pause this would be followed by the squeal enough to take anyone by surprise: "Audit". Finally came the lament wrenched from the sore-tried heart of a hero after a long stint in solitary: "Stock changing hands".

The dilapidated, lugubrious building complete with the squeals of rats and squeaks of mice put one in the mood for dark thoughts and deeds of a far from friendly nature. There was always no end of things happening in the "Cedar" shop, linked to the outside world by means of brief notices and its back door, access to which was obstructed by boxes. The store-keepers and assistants were always changing, moving straight on from "Cedar's" counters to prison, on account of swindling and bribery, and at the same time the goods on sale never seemed to change, nor did the indifferent treatment of customers, who were sometimes impudent enough to disturb the elite members of the local community to which the staff of the village shop had long considered themselves to belong with requests for some particular kind of washing powder.

sophisticated way she drank her wine in small sips, followed puffs at her cigarette rather than anything to eat. On curvaceous front there sparkled a gold pendant that must have weighed at least a kilo and I could not help thinking to myself how many sable, elk, squirrel, ermine, sturgeon and other he must have to fall to pay for that mere fashion accessory?

The village lads trooped after this rare personage as if at a wedding, their gazes full of devotion and behind them at respectful distance came the local girls dressed in simpler, more colourful clothes. They were all smoking and laughing about something but I could not shake off that feeling of embarrassment that always comes over me during a badly rehearsed even if convincingly acted play. From the loudspeaker on the ro there roared down that magical Ukrainian song *Vechorny morder* by some trendy band or Dixieland group and revamped an up-to-the-minute hit: "The North is not as lonely as it seems."

The college-girl pawed at the ground with her feet and her pendant bounced up and down on her breast. The whole mob crowd following in their idol's footsteps started kicking up dust, wobbling to and fro and letting out the odd yelp. Some in a group a little way off stood staring wide-eyed at the whole group, but in particular at the fashionable young lady, their mouths wide open in astonishment. They were all obviously all with their curly Cossack forelocks, slanting eyes inherited from their Northern mothers and dressed in home-made tunics of sat or silk completed with belts. Even here though one could note the odd pair of narrow-pointed shoes, watches with shiny metal straps, brightly coloured socks and even the rare luxury of a pair of jeans could be glimpsed occasionally. These young stalwarts from the taiga were blinking in the bright lights, taking a look round and sniffing things out for themselves. They were not up to the dancing yet, they'd prefer the usual old way—squeezing the wench in orange behind the bath-house or between the stacks of firewood was more their style. They were still timid and learning to find their bearings. Nowadays young Kerzhaks of a very different brood were being hatched and they were most eager to be part of all that was "new and advanced like", tearing off the old rusty chains of their forebears' traditions together with the tender flesh beneath them.

The old folk still observed to a certain extent the old ways but their firm principles and faith were tottering, had lost their firm

"Why should the scales be to blame?" grumbled the skipper pushing the metal catch over to the side and then moving the balance along the steel beam. "There are a lot of you short-tempered people round here and I have to answer for the property." Then by way of an admonishment he added "If you'd given those fellows a bottle, you could've saved your strength."

"Mind your own business!" *Betushka* gave a glare on her siren. The skipper who was still arguing with his passenger hurried to take the mooring rope. The cluster of people on the high cliff started moving down towards the landing stage.

I was sitting on a log throwing stones into the water and all of sudden I heard a crunch of pebbles behind me followed by a low familiar voice: "You haven't got a fag, have you?"

"I don't smoke."

"You don't smoke?" asked Little Lady in surprise, planting himself unceremoniously on my log. "Is it for health reasons or are you trying to save money?"

I had no wish to speak to him. I had had enough of him in Yeniseisk. I could not stop thinking about Kolya. There he was lying now at home, his wits blurred by the sedative, half asleep, half in pain, but soon the effect of the drug would wear off and then how could the poor chap be helped. Akim came over to us after helping Lyuda embark and insulted by her attempt to give him a rouble: "She doesn't understand the first thing about people. She can take her wretched rouble to the grave with her..." Akim greeted Little Lady by a shake of the hand and gave him a cigarette. Little Lady shook his head in my direction, Akim said something to him and they embarked on an amicable discussion of everything under the sun.

Betushka moved out from the quay moving up the Yenisei. Because it was one of those nights when no darkness would fall so one felt like sleeping, the crowd on the bank did not disperse, the villagers went on wandering about looking for ways to amuse themselves and occasionally finding some. Little Lady passed the time creeping up on the couples in the clump of poplars, behind the stacks of firewood, in the bath-houses, in the bushes and other secluded spots. He was such a pastmaster at this spying that it became almost impossible for people to hide where he would not find them. This tiresome pastime of his had led the local lads to give Little Lady the once-over and he had lain low for a while

after that, but his craft as a spy proved so inexhaustible and a consuming that there was soon no escaping him again, once I had resumed his hobby.

Little Lady soon adapted himself to life in Choosh. The fishermen were only too willing to take him along with them for the sake of fun. While pretending to be the village idiot and laying on a "show" for nothing, Little Lady at the same time learnt to wade, set fish traps, mastered the essentials of fishing, got hold of a small wooden boat with an old engine which a prowling poacher sold him after escaping the law. Little Lady acquired two fishing lines and to the amazement of the other men began to catch fish at a fairly brisk pace, and then faster still to sell it to anyone he might come across. On steamers, motorised barges, launches, canoes, aeroplanes, helicopters and all types of air and water transport shrewd travellers take along a "special stock of fuel" which they exchange in the summer for fish, game, meat, and in winter for nuts and furs. All the transactions work on a barter basis and the unit of exchange is the vodka bottle.

Over a ton of fish "caught" with bottles was confiscated from a ship sailing down the neighbouring river, the Ob. In order to search this ship which year in, year out, had been involved in requisitions of this sort and call the captain to account, who had already grown fat from the resale of fish and was now heaping villas and cars on himself, his relatives, and all his grown-up children, the sanction of the public prosecutor was needed. But the public prosecutor was as far away as the Almighty himself. Enterprising fellows like Little Lady who catch plenty of fish in the summer using fish traps, and through holes in the ice in the winter enjoy a very easy life in these parts. Yet before the war there had been virtually no "river pirates" on the Yenisei. In those days the fish factories used to draw up contracts with local and newly-arrived fishermen, paying them an advance and providing them with all the fishing tackle: then once a week they would come round with a boat to collect up the fish from the fishermen's base, and at the same time to supply the fishermen with food, work-gloves, protective aprons, boots and other special items of clothing. These small teams of fishermen, often only consisting of two men, were the strictest possible inspectors of the rivers because they were anxious to catch a good deal of fish, fulfil their quotas so as to receive their special bonuses in the autumn. The organisations in charge of this seasonal fishing paid the men on their

Little Lady. "But where on earth can you get hold of those now days. Those are sold at places on the main railway line so that Sundays or well-earned holidays the working men can go and take their sweethearts out into the country and enjoy the scenery."

Little Lady's heart glowed with happy premonitions, he felt ready to forgive everyone for anything they had done to him and was ready to love all and sundry, now that the end of his misadventure was in sight and the fulfilment of his dreams was almost within reach. Then he saw that not a steamer but a launch with a song-deck was out in front with cosy freshly painted hatches and radio playing on board. "The chiefs!" thought Little Lady coming over respectful all at once. "Someone's going somewhere on official business. I can fleece them—they've got money to spare!" With that cheerful thought Little Lady slowed down the engine, took one of the larger sterlet from his collection, drew himself up to his full height, not that that helped given his dimensions! He climbed up onto the seat to make himself more conspicuous and gripping his large fish by the tail he brandished it in the air calling: "Hallo there! I'm calling to you, friends! I've got a fish for sale here, you can have it for a song! Ha-a-ah!"

The sterlet was still alive, heaving to and fro, pursing its strong lips, bristling its hard fins as if planning to fly away.

Little Lady noticed that the boat gave a signal not laid down in any of the river navigation codes, yet nevertheless well-known on all our rivers—an all-embracing friendly swoop of the white flag up and under by the signalman. The two boats drew near to each other, Little Lady soon found himself alongside the larger but close enough for a boarding. His narrow old boat and the white launch with its black hull and the formal atmosphere on deck made a stark contrast: by now the radio was no longer blaring, no one was shouting over it any more as if about to be strangled. All that could now be heard was a woman crooning on a mournful, pleading note: "Conductor, conductor, won't you sell me a ticket." "What about a screw, I've got no tickets, huh!" Little Lady was a postmaster at twisting the words of any song or proverb to suit his own ends and could do this at a moment's notice. "Yes, it seems you've got a real strict bunch here, real hot at their job. Geologists no less, with some one from the Ministry to keep a check on finances and labour discipline." Little Lady pulled himself together, on his guard by this time.

Lady thought to himself "Perhaps his wife has just come some other trouble has hit him, and here I am laughing at

"How much is the sterlet?" asked the stranger still rummaging through the papers in the desk. Little Lady hoped that in a dance with local custom first of all a half-litre bottle of ^{or} way of an opener would be brought out and as rats to go something like a fresh cucumber, which was a rare ^{delicacy} that time of the year in those parts before they got down to business of barter. But they did not treat him to anything "a mean lot," he thought to himself.

"A rouble fifty!"

"Now, come on, mate! Everyone sells at a rouble round here

"Everyone can sell at a rouble, but my price is a rouble! And you can take it or leave it!" Little Lady began to insist even himself, he was sticking to his guns so firmly. The river life in the open sure did make a man strong! If things went on this they might even get to the stage when he would start beat his wife instead of she him. Then he'd make a point of paying visit on those upstarts who had punished him for spying on them in the settlement, one by one he'd see to them all...

"Why do you ask so much?"

"My engine is no good already—for a start!" Little Lady commented counting his complaints on his fingers. "Then then the business of finding petrol. The inspectors are on the war-path for another. Wine's gone up too!" Once he had mentioned a word wine all his arrogance flew to the wind and Little Lady prattled on like any hawker at the market, paying no heed to appearances any more and not letting anyone else get a word edgeways. "The Angar sterlet is out fairly oozing oil wife's name day shop a long way no time to buy anything my mouth's got dry."

"Just a moment, now, just a moment!" begged the stranger, finding his pen at last. He opened some book or other and scribbled.

"You fire away like a machine-gun! I can't catch you!"

"If you think the sterlets are dear you can take them or leave them, it's up to you!" chipped in Little Lady. "Yap-ya-ap!"

"Nightingale! Story-teller!" said the man behind the desk taking stock of Little Lady as he looked him up and down. "Yer show"! Real Yerhov stuff we're hearing tonight!"

* The author of the famous fairy-tale *The Little Humpbacked Horse*—Tr.

Soon however Little Lady recovered and again started his din of
de, began to drink, to make merry and had no intention of
saying any finer. So in the end he found himself in the court-
house, and that was how his and my path crossed in Verkhovsk.
And Little Lady had new material for his rip-roaring tales.

Waiting till the time was ripe for fishing Little Lady used to be
a loss for an occupation in those sleepy hours before dawn and
was almost more than he could do to resist springing on people
once again. He wanted to have a drink and he tried to find out
from Akim whether he might not be able to rustle up a bottle of
vodka on board *Betushka*, but Akim told him to get lost and we
walked away from the river across a large allotment with a pond
top where the potatoes were only just beginning to flower, while
the cucumbers under their frame only had two or three leaves to
show for themselves, the row of carnations was just peeping through
and floppy-looking nettles clung to the edge of the path. We
walked on slowly to the place where my dying mother was tucked
up with pain, for the drugs which they brought him from the local
dispensary only helped for two or three hours. I had to think and
decide where I could get hold of some more. These worries put
Little Lady right out of my mind because people like that you
only notice when they are getting under your feet. They do not
make a lasting impression, their image soon vanishes like smoke
from a fire of damp wood. Even though it may be thick and still
at first, it disappears quickly.

Beyond the fence of the allotment and the old gate, the river
seemed tired and grey, that river on whose bed lay hundreds and
thousands of traps, lines, nets, and such white stuporous sticks.
White fish, burbot and salmon were getting tangled up in them,
struggling and trashing to and fro, getting stifled with mud. The
river the inspectorate became the largest the murders that would
be and then they floated to the surface rotten, their eyes gone and
their bellies swollen, they were bobbing about in the waves, their
mouths and gills dogged with silt, and then both the people
guarding the river's wealth and the thieving poachers would shake
their heads in concern, musing. "What's happening, what's hap-
pening? The country's treasure is vanishing before our very
eyes!"

what they want to achieve, they achieve, whenever they need to force out of the village they force out

The fishermen sit round their bonfire, relaxing in mind and body before their far from easy work, they wait for nightfall saying nonchalant remarks to each other as they do so. In their bonfire apart from two logs someone has thrown in some painted doors on which the initial for LADIES can be picked out, old staves from the club-house, a cupboard and boards, the fire is burning well sending up hot flames high into the air. The fire is flickering in the evening breeze that is fanning over the river, scorching the men's faces with its raging flames, while their backs are cold from the fresh wind blowing at them from the targa and from the clammy cold sent forth by the dirty melting surface of the ice collected at the foot of the steep bank. It seemed impossible that around Moscow and through almost the whole of Central Russia drought was raging, forests were being ruined by fire, grass and corn were ravaged, swamp lands were going dry, the slimy beds of lakes and ponds were open to the sun and cracking, rivers were growing more and more shallow while creatures of field and forest were languishing and dying in the heat.

Out here they had had a long spring which brought on an immense thaw with mountains of ice floating down the river. The thicker ice in the lower reaches of the river stood firm and cold weather still reigned there, while nearer its source the thaw flood had already begun. At the Krasnoyarsk hydroelectric power station a huge wave caused by overflow disposal heaped and crushed the ice. The formidable unprecedented mass of ice drove everything before it, piled up in the rapids, blocked the river and in a seething frenzy when turned off course it then swept across the gullies and meadows, lashing at the riverside villages, piling up mountains of stones, dragging along with it timber, huts, fences, rubbish, litter. In the woods and particularly in the low-lying swampland between the Ob and the Yenisei the ground was still covered with dirty snow. The flood is boundless and impassable, and mosquitoes, gnats and midges start breeding in multitudes at this time.

While it was still light I forced my way to a secret place on the river to fish. Grayling, had they risen. At or small puddle. If it w

to the Opankha situation with the he osters I saw a stagnant water I

put my foot into it, stumbled and fell—mosquitoes had been hovering there in a dense shroud, relentless in this corner of the wind, here I was up against not these slow-witted European mosquitoes which first have a good tug and a swat before making ready to come and bite. Here we had Northern, belched mosquitoes almost too small to be seen, that had themselves at you with no warning and bite into whatever they laid with no prelude. They can bring down an elk and drive a bear being to distraction. In those parts one of the most ~~best~~ punishments meted out to wrongdoers, more often than a blasphemer's, was to tie them to a tree in the taiga and leave them for the mosquitoes to devour.

It was long since time for the forest creatures to emerge if come out onto the curved crests of the mountains and hills, but the floodwaters and the snows blocked all the paths through the wide expanses of the swamp-ridden taiga. That was where the mosquitoes and midges would finish off the defenceless animal. One day a solitary elk made his way down to the river, through the water and then lay down on the top of the island within sight of a group of newly arrived limestone diggers. Availing themselves of their axes and crowbars they crept up on the animal. The elk did not rise or run away from them. It looked at them out of its clouded with pus. Plugs of dried blood were sticking out of its wheezing nostrils and its ears were also blocked with dried blood. The elk's back was humped, its lips were drooping and its fur was matted; by this time the animal seemed vacantly aloof and oblivious of everything around it. Only its body and sleep-blearry eyes felt the liberation of its execution; through its nostrils it breathed in not the thick whirl of a mosquito cloud but the cool wind which penetrated not just its dirty fur but also the pores of its thick skin. Only the ends of its ears gave a slight quiver hardly visible to the human eye belying the capacity of the great booby body to appreciate the joy of being alive.

The men caught the elk and killed it—now they would have meat, albeit bloodless and sickly but meat nevertheless; they had enough of making do with carp and perch.

At sunset I caught about twenty grayling in the mouth of the Oparikha. Akim went looking for something he lost in the bushes. I advised him to ask the fishermen for what he required. "You're a dope!" cried Akim and gave me up as a bad job. Earlier when we had been walking along the river Akim had dropped a box of

matches in the water. I suggested we should turn back to the fishermen. He lost his temper with me after that "How can we? You're an utter stranger! And a fat-bellied one at that!" I laughed assuming that he was joking. However while we were fishing, the graylings looked small at the mouth of the Opankha and I moved on round a bend in the river and there I saw a bearded fellow sitting and catching grayling, such a peaceful looking fisherman. With the excessively sociable habits of the town dweller I started talking to him about how the fish were biting, but then Akim rushed out of the bushes and pulled me away from the bank in a very crude fashion.

"Why d'you have to poke your nose into things like all the time?" he hissed "Don't you see Kerzhak's out fishing? Catching grayling. Why are you gaping?" He looked at me as if I was a mere slip of a schoolboy. "Two of his brothers are skinning the elk. They've brought down three, let their blood—but it doesn't flow. There's no blood. The mosquitoes have sucked it all out. Not a drop. They'll sell the meat to the ship people. People from the towns will eat anything."

Akim found the matches in his iron box. It was one that had a picture of the Kremlin's Spasskaya Tower stamped on it which I had once given Kolya. Oh Kolya, Kolya. There was a real brother for you. Akim had not managed to find our cooking pot or spoons. He was roasting the grayling on a spit, he was turning his long face away from the heat of the fire, and almost closed his eyes from the smoke. Nothing can beat it for taste—fish roasted on spits, given that the cook knows how and does not burn the tail or belly while at the same time making sure the fish's back is cooked properly.

Near the bonfire four fishermen had gathered by this time—there was a suspicious launch lurking about in the neighbourhood which had frightened them away from their nets and lines and so now they were lying down on the stones waiting till it was safe again. They thought they might pass the time trying to catch grayling but they started too late. It grew darker as night drew near, the air pressure dropped, the fish stopped playing and coming in for food, only the trout was still chasing the carp in the shallows, they would be flapping their tails all night, like endless volleys from a shot-gun. The Kerzhaks stayed concealed in the bushes till the dead of night, in the pitch dark of early evening they went over to the other bank of the Yenisei in two boats, drew

up on the island and there was not another sound to be heard from them for they were hiding meat in the ice.

A tidy-looking, clean-shaven fisherman, economical in his movements and gait and sedate in conversation, brought out a local newspaper; now that this character Utrobin had nothing better to do he began to read out loud from the paper throwing ironic glances at his audience as he did so: "In recent years our poachers have started plying their trade at night to make sure they are not disturbed. This has made the work of the fishing inspectorate much more difficult. Sophisticated night viewing devices are now being used to combat poaching. Soon all the Yenisei inspectorate's boats and launches will be fitted out with such complex optical equipment which has a radius of several kilometres. So if any of these night poachers escape their pursuers, his silhouette, face and clothes and any distinguishing features of his boat together with its make, and other details will already be known to the officers of the fishing inspectorate.

"There are all too many cases of poachers giving the inspectorate the slip. Their outboard motors are usually powerful ones and sometimes there are even two to a boat. Keeping up with them is no joke!"

"You can say that again—a fat lot of hope they'll ever have of catching us. We're off into the distance before they can turn round!" boasted a fellow with a fierce-looking wide-boned face and a metallic glint in his eye. He was known as the Commodore and was having an affair with the salesgirl Raissa.

"Yap-ya-ap!" burst out Little Lady, thrashing his legs about as he beat up the fire.

"Don't butt in!" ordered a burly fellow raising himself up on one elbow. For some reason he looked down arrogantly at all the others around him.

"Now in cases like this night viewing devices will come to the rescue at night time," Utrobin read on, "and in the day time photographic guns will be used which have now also been supplied to the fishing inspectorate. The number of transport vessels used by the Yenisei inspectorate grows each year. After the ice had melted on the Yenisei and its tributaries sixty diesel-powered boats, fourteen launches, thirty-five motor boats and over a hundred duralumin boats have set out to patrol the waterways. The whole fleet is in a state of combat readiness. No mercy will be shown to the enemies of Nature!"

The fisherman folded the newspaper slowly and then put it away into the side-pocket of his jacket. A deep silence reigned.

"They're hounding us like hares!" said Little Lady who was incapable of remaining silent for more than a minute.

"Parasites!" cursed the Commodore and his gaze came over all leaden by this time. "The fleet is in a state of combat readiness," he parodied the words of the article in a mumbling voice. "So they haven't got as far as aiming an atomic bomb at us yet, then?"

"I don't know what things are coming to. For ever and a day we've all gone fishing and there's been enough for everyone! Nowadays though the fish are dying by the thousand and all there is left to pick up is the odd crumb. Oh, mercy me! We ought to turn our back on all this dilly-dallying and make for the South, for the Inuit. If we don't go out into the targa and fish what's there to keep us here?" mused Urobin joining in the conversation again. Although he spoke as if he was addressing everyone I sensed that it was for me that he wanted to bring his point home.

"Them local hacks are paid all the same for any rubbish they write!" mocked the burly fellow and stretching out his large body he began to settle down by the fire, crunching down the little stones, squashing them into the sandy soil with his side and elbows.

"What kind of gun was that they were on about?" inquired Akim all of a sudden. He had little concept of any complex optical apparatus but the lanthar word "gun" had had a profound effect upon him.

"Just a gun!" shouted the Commodore. "The one they will aim at you and shoot you with!"

"They've got no right to do that!" protested the large fellow as he shifted his position on the pebbles.

"They're just driving us out of the river and the forest! There won't be room for us anywhere on earth soon!"

The conversation grew more animated and developed into an argument and obscenities were soon freely used. I meanwhile made a closer study of this crowd around the bonfire trying to understand, remember and sort things out.

The man who stood out most was the Commodore whom I had met on the river during my last visit. His surname was also Urobin—it was a common one up and down the Yenisei—and he was a brother of the fisherman who had just read us this:

"You can say that again - a lot of hope they'll be catching us. We're off into the distance before they can be found!" boasted a fellow with a fierce-looking weathered face and a metallic glint in his eye. He was known as the Old man and was having an affair with the salesgirl Rana.

"Yap-ya-ap!" burst out Little Lady, thrashing his head as he beat up the fire.

"Don't butt in!" ordered a burly fellow taring himself up on one elbow. For some reason he looked down arrogantly at all the others around him.

"Now in cases like this night viewing devices will come to the rescue at night time," Utrobin read on, "and in the daytime photographic guns will be used which have now also been supplied to the fishing inspectorate. The number of transport vessels used by the Yenisei inspectorate grows each year. After the ice had melted on the Yenisei and its tributaries sixty diesel powered boats, fourteen launches, thirty-five motor boats and over a hundred duralumin boats have set out to patrol the water ways. The whole fleet is in a state of combat readiness. No mercy will be shown to the enemies of Nature!"

The fisherman folded the newspaper slowly and then put it away into the side-pocket of his jacket. A deep silence reigned. "They're bounding us like hares!" said Little Lady who was incapable of remaining silent for more than a minute. "Parasites!" cursed the Commodore and his gaze came over all laden by this time. "The fleet is in a state of combat readiness!" he parodied the words of the article in a mumbling voice. "So they haven't got as far as aiming an atomic bomb at us yet, then?"

"I don't know what things are coming to. For ever and a day I've all gone fishing and there's been enough for everyone! Nowadays though the fish are dying by the thousand and all there's left to pick up is the odd crumb. Oh, mercy me! We ought to turn our back on all this dilly-dallying and make for the South, for the fruit. If we don't go out into the tundra and fish what's there to keep us here?" mused Utrobin joining in the conversation again. Although he spoke as if he was addressing everyone, I sensed that it was for me that he wanted to bring his point home. "Them local hacks are paid all the same for any rubbish they write!" mocked the burly fellow and stretching out his large body he began to settle down by the fire, crunching down the little bones, squashing them into the sandy soil with his side and bows.

"What kind of gun was that they were on about?" inquired Utrobin all of a sudden. He had little concept of any complex optical apparatus but the familiar word "gun" had had a profound effect upon him.

"Just a gun!" shouted the Commodore. "The one they will aim at you and shoot you with!"

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"They're just driving us out of the river and the forest! There isn't be room for us anywhere on earth soon!"

The conversation grew more animated and developed into an argument and obscenities were soon freely used. I meanwhile made a closer study of this crowd around the bonfire trying to understand, remember and sort things out.

The man who stood out most was the Commodore whom I had met on the river during my last visit. His surname was also Utrobin—it was a common one up and down the Yenisei—and he was brother of the fisherman who had just read us the newspaper.

but he clearly did not remember his father as an old appearance of a strong black in the old days were almost had called to the Yemba a black-headed Chechen over a distance from the Caucasus and now with each passing of unknown long forgotten desperately was still keeping his feet his descendants and marching on into the future present steadily his formidable image. So the new breed had he added to the Ustian clan must black of all be a man Chechen indeed the Commodore had another excuse too that was the Chechenets. The Commodore was all made of bone and those bones of his stuck out prominently everywhere his eyebrows were the thickness of two fingers and they stood black and massive from the steep curve of his forehead sweeping one over the bridge of his nose. His glaring eyes sparkled on those brows always on the alert and thrusting down a challenge meanwhile the unruly curly hair on the Commodore's head as his slightly flaccid lips had clearly been handed down to the Chechenets by his mother. They seemed not to fit the rest of his face, they lent a softer note to this strong-armed impetuous figure. He did not speak but rather called out his words and while doing so he lashed his listener with his lightning glance, or perhaps was with his savage appearance, his pipe or even with his posture that he produced an awesome effect. He had in actual fact been the captain of a hundred-ton barge from a state farm and he was one in mind of the song famous among pirates, filibusters and other scum: "Strong and powerful like an oak, there he stood with his pipe in his teeth; like a bone from a hungry dog, just you try and take it away."

In the evening when the Commodore's boat nosed into the Opankha and after pulling it up he went over to the bonfire caught sight of a wet sack in the stern in which a whole pile of sterlets was heaving around all on top of each other. Everything in that boat was untidy, slippery, unorganised, in the stern leaned up against the hatch was a double-barrelled gun pitted with rust. It is not allowed to touch someone else's gun, but I could not stop myself; I unlocked it, took out a cartridge and there I was confronted with a lead bullet sticking up out of the brass rim of the cartridge case. "What d'you want with a gun in this quiet summer season," I inquired when I came back to the bonfire. The Commodore started, threw a cutting glance in my direction and then all at once came over pensive: "You never know," he

heart contracted with pain and how the gentle breath of the young woman soothed and eased his external pain causing painful flames to leap up within, causing a desire to grab her and carry away into the unknown....

*Love me, my baby,
Love me, my dear,
Love me while I'm here...*

sang the Commodore, pleased that such a balmy wind was blowing, filling his body and soul with well-being, that the ship *Kara* from the local fishing inspectorate had gone chugging off towards the lower reaches of the Yenisei, that the water was growing clearer and warmer, that the sterlet were starting to gather by the ridges where fine little traps and lines had been set to keep them busy. Let the sterlet play for a while, the silly darlings, everything starts with play in life.

Can fish cry? Who knows? They live in the water and if they were to cry it would not show but one thing is for sure they cannot sob, and that's a fact. If they could, then the whole of the Yenisei, and not just the Yenisei but all rivers and seas would echo with their weeping. Nature is always crafty and gives its creature its fitting task: some are called upon to howl and growl, others to live and die in silence. When the little sterlet plays with the hook and bouncing cork floats, its side gets caught and then into the sack with it! And there's pretty penny to buy smart shoes for his daughter for her school-leavers ball! His daughter—that was the Commodore's weakness. She had inherited all the finest features from her father's face: the strikingly black brows, the curly dark hair, the quick piercing eyes with the same wild glint in them, and then from her mother the Northern creamy skin, the long straight neck, the scarlet lips and the sedate gait. Fine! To have a daughter was just fine! If only she could stay at home all her life, but some smart customer would come and lead her off—such were the laws of Nature. What could be done? She wouldn't be the first, she wouldn't be the last. Perhaps he might end up with a decent chap for a son-in-law, and they would start going fishing together, and sharing the odd bottle.

*What beautiful d-a-a-y-y
And the sun shines over the meadow...*

The Commodore kept singing and day-dreaming about everything that came into his head or that the wind blew into his ears, but at the same time he was making his way along the tangle, freeing the hooks from all sorts of rubbish as he went. It was amazing all the things that were caught in the current—rags, dogs' muzzles, boots, tourists' straw hats and bathing trunks. But that was nothing in comparison with the fishing inspectors who rounded everyone on the river. At night they had to check out their lines with a torch. In the dark August nights when you could not see as far as your nose they could not make anything out and meanwhile the sterlets had come in their hundreds. That had been a real challenge of course. Suddenly he felt something large turn in the water. Sturgeon! it heaved, lunged, and then started jerking off frantically. His heart stood still, his hands felt weak and he could hardly keep hold of the line. The fisherman stopped to get his breath back, recovered and resumed his fishing—by now the sturgeon was truly weak but it was easier to get the better of one like that. It had stopped moving altogether now. There was a slight flicker of movement but it was no longer shaking to and fro. Something had risen to the surface, but was not moving. It had exhausted itself to death now. But, what the hell was that! The Commodore switched his torch on. There was a drowned man in the water. His teeth were bared, his eye-sockets empty, the nose was missing—it must have been eaten by fish, otters or muskrats. . . It was a good thing he had strong nerves—he might simply have fallen out of the boat, out there in the middle of the river all by himself! That's what men go through as they try to catch fish! That's what a breadwinner's luck can be! With closed eyes the Commodore unhooked the fellow and off he floated again. He did not like having to call a dead man by that name particularly when it was a drowned man. If he had referred to him just as a fellow then burying him wouldn't have been so important and everything could have been rounded off as a joke. A chance encounter and a casual parting. Yet although the fellow had floated away, his heart was still anxious, he had not treated him well, had not done his Christian duty by him. He should have entrusted him to Mother Earth. He also felt uneasy because he remembered the superstition "If a drowned man floats down the river feet first he's looking for another to keep him company!" How had he been floating? Feet first? How could you hope to tell in the dark? After that as soon as he heard something heavy

to organise your sick pay! The distance between the two boats was shrinking. The dotalomni boat from the inspectate was coming out from the bank on a diagonal course. Its engine was old and worn-out but it was chugging away boldly and even now and a trail of grey smoke could be seen rising behind it. They'd overhauled the motor and bolted it together again. The Commodore was worried by now, perhaps he had let the inspectate get too near. "We won't let the side down! No, they'll see a real trick. Now I'll show them how the world goes round!"

The bottle which he had not finished was the third he had to that day. That morning he had drunk a half-litre of vodka with his neighbour at breakfast starting it with strong tea. They sat there all dignified drinking their 'tea'. The wife came in and began sniffing. She had a nose as sensitive as that of a Siberian hawk who chases after squirrels. "What's made your mugs all red? The only way out was to roll a barrel at her and strike her dumb."

If you came to work with me out on the river in the wind, then it wouldn't just be your face that turned red!" When he went out for firewood he took out from the log pile a bottle of Vermouth which he had hidden away for emergencies and then they drank that dry as well while they talked, and next what's more. It didn't make his head spin. But he hadn't had a proper meal, just a snack on his way, some cold potatoes, and now the Commodore was boxed up enough to have the cheek to finish the wine right in front of the inspectors. He would throw his head back, gargle down the wine straight from the bottle, pushing out his flat stomach and play the clown. But it wasn't a circus here after all. The kind of applause they would give you would take a long time to recover from. Poachers nowadays were more like sappers in wartime. The only difference between a sapper and a poacher was that the former would get a medal and the latter a fine or a spell inside.

He threw a sterlet overboard, it was dead and hanging all slim on the last hook, then he jumped on to the stern and grabbed the starter rope. "Get us out of this one, good old home-grown engine! Carry me away! The fishing inspectors are right on top of us." At the first pull the engine gave a full chug and started muttering away under the stern. "You must give praise where it's due, when we want to we can make things that work!" thought the Commodore to himself. The thought was pleasant, comfort-

ing, and it began to make him ponder that if all we mustered all our energies of mind and body and didn't just sit around but work together properly then we'd show those capitalists and imperialists what was what not just when it came to quantity but to quality as well. However there was no time for him to think out that profound materialist thought to its very end because Semyon had got up off the deck hatch and was making movements with his hand as if he was putting a light out or catching a gadfly—as he ordered the Commodore to stop his engine.

"You're a playful fellow, Semyon, real playful! All right then off we go!" The Commodore turned the accelerator handle, the engine began to roar, the boat shuddered and swept over the river, over the smooth mirror of water and it seemed as if the boat might get up such a speed that it might take off and war into the sky. It was as if the engines of the latest make had been specially invented for poachers.

The boats gained speed. It was strange to think that not so long ago people had only been able to row along or use poles on little boats. Nowadays you could pop out for a small evening trip on the river, overtake the fishermen with smaller engines, pick the fish up from under their very noses and then quickly make off. Hearts a-light, pockets ringing and life's a real picnic. A big thank-you to the man who thought up an engine like this! He really learnt his trade properly. It'd be nice to have a drink with him—I would stand him a whole bucketful of vodka.

The Commodore was flying along over the wide expanse of water, his heart was light and full of courage, his body was at one with the engine, taut and throbbing with energy, his blood burned in the excitement of the chase, and he began to regret the wine he had not finished. "Never mind, never mind. I'll swig it down to celebrate winning the battle afterwards."

Two engines straining fit to burst roared along the river, beating up the water behind them, and to the neutral observer it might have seemed that two wild fellows were having a race. It was just the kind of sport that people in Choosb enjoyed. Sometimes someone drowns in the process but you can't have any contest without risks.

There were no distinguishing characteristics on the boat from the fishing inspectorate—only a number, and a dent on the right side and a dark red stripe along the top of each side. The boss had asked the firemen for the paints because nothing was issued to the

brother-in-law'—and offered a smoke but Semyon tipped the cigarette into the packet and there and then fired Kuklin round the head. Kuklin almost fell over and then said: "You're a son-of-a-bitch, not a brother-in-law."

Strange but true! Everyone got drunk after that of course, as wild and of course Kuklin was the worst offender. "I'll kill you, Judas, finish him off!" After that they all had their deepest sleep and recovered their senses, but there was no point. In the first place they all knew Semyon's habits and had ample time to make a detailed study of his character as to speak. If they were to see a new inspector they'd have to start all over again, take stock of him and then what if he should turn out to be stricter than his predecessor? Semyon gets in the way of course, and demands for nothing regardless of who anyone is or what rank they may have, but the same time he lives and let live other people—sometimes the engine of his brain is on the blink or his heart keeps him away from his job for a while, or his old head-wound starts bothering him again. Then it'll be time for the hay-making, or something to be harvested in the garden, or another meeting in the village council where he is a deputy. Once in a while he sets off to a regional meeting to decide how to catch which offenders. He's a good sort, although he's a pest.

and turned round quite sure that by this time the inspector would be behind the hump of a thickly wooded island and that he went round it and switched off his engine he would be able to flow along carried by the current and hide in the slip away into the settlement. But the boat with the crimson round its deck was catching up, he had not heard it because of the roar of his engine behind him, and still in hot pursuit. It was a path through the clear water and cast a small shadow behind its stern. The Commodore estimated the distance, looked at his watch, and his cigarette fell out of his mouth. He tried to turn back but all he managed to do was to bat it with his hand in the process—after all the chase had been going on for twenty minutes now. His fuel would soon be finished as well, and the spare was in the luggage box and anyway it only had just over a gallon in it. He had hoped to take a look at his lines while the barge was being loaded with boards. "Semyon will be fiddling around his engine for ages," the local experts had said, but now he was out on the river again and with a new fellow who'd take over the job what's more! "Just imagine! A new fellow! The Devil take him!" He couldn't even get away by going up the river. Should he go over to the shore and run off into the woods? What about the engine and the boat? And the sterlet? And the wine he had finished? Yes, and then people would recognise it as his if they'd get to the bottom of the story, confiscate the boat and if he'd get it in the neck after all that. No, that was too much. It was not for nothing that his daughter had called him the Commodore. If he was to live up to his name then he couldn't let them catch him and meet his downfall! Leaning forward with his hawk-like nose close to the wind the Commodore turned the boat round making such a steep semicircle that it almost glided on its side. Leaving behind a white trail the Commodore hurried away down the river. His boat bounced along over a humped wave, bang down with its bows and sent the wave's white foam flying in a cloud of spray. The Commodore licked hungrily at the morsel on his lips and baring his teeth in impertinent fashion made straight for the inspectors' boat. He came up so near that he could make out the amazement on the faces of his two pursuers. "Semyon's successor doesn't look too bad, he's well built and tough. He's got dark hair and a look of a gypsy about him with those uncanny eyes and bags underneath them. That's not your little Semyon with a patched skull. He'd put up a real fight at



always be a kid. No troubles, no regrets, a little bit of fun shooting at birds out of catapults and enjoying baked potatoes.

His stomach felt weak. What a trial life was! He couldn't remember when he had gone to bed at the proper time, eaten proper meals, gone to the cinema or had enough time to enjoy himself with the wife. His legs were frozen and plagued him all night, he suffered from heart-burns and there were black dots in his eyes and there was no one to complain to. Cheering up a bit he repeated what some desperate fellows had once said about a poacher's life: "It's all trouble, hurry and no pleasure, and it will always be that way." They were right. Wine was the only way out but the cheap sour stuff he drank was dangerous to even sip at they said it was real poison and those men on the loose knew everything, they've been everywhere. They may have been in different institutes and universities but they've sure learnt a thing or two.

Karasinka Cape with the little boys, the camp-fires, the dogs that always clustered round the fires were out of sight behind a bend in the river now. Soon he would come to the mouth of the River Sym, a river that came from the swamps near the Ob and flowed out of the taiga. In that river you could hide not just with a small boat but with a great big steamer, or perhaps even a flotilla of boats—given you knew how of course—there were so many islands, branches, bends and channels in it. On the west bank of the Sym just by its mouth was a settlement by the name of Krivlyak. It was standing in a tall cedar forest on a high sandy slope, on to which the sunlight shone from the river and it was sheltered from the cold of the taiga by the cedars.

In '32 a string of carts had passed through with new settlers. They were being led northwards by a shrewd leader who had picked out that good spot, called a halt and then ordered them to start building. First of all the men made a wooden barrack and then little houses in the river's bend among the cedars. That was how the settlement with the name of Krivlyak had come into being, a settlement where people were cooperative and worked well. It was an hour's journey from Choosh but the people there seemed to have come from a different world. They were very sociable and there were no grabbers on the make, nor were knife-fights ever heard of there.

The main channel of the Sym River passed under the bank on which the settlement of Krivlyak was built. Boats had to make a

a faster gear and moved the boat forward into the choppy water of the Sym, a full of strong, heavy, heavy water that no one sports, where there were hardly any waters. There was much timber, fish and game along in its banks but they would never be exhausted. There was no one party that plunder its riches anyway. No poachers would make their way into that tangle of the logs in the autumn. Even now it was cold and wild remembrance. Sometimes even in the worst of snow there did not melt, but just lay there dirty and yellow, but with spruce needles, winged seeds and cones. Then it was as if August the boat-frost would start and the first cold would be and new snow would settle. Each foot-print would stand as clearly on it as if on a sheet of paper. There are plenty of fox along the banks of the deserted Sym and the time will soon be for hunting animals for their fur. All he would need for a fox collar for Tanka's coat would be half a dozen sable. That he could celebrate leaving school in style and after go on to enter. She was a fine-looking girl there was no denying it. Dressed out in sable she could go and catch someone with a Master's Degree.

The Commodore had long since forgotten about the impostor stuck out in the shallows. He was caught up in other worries. But something was gnawing in his chest and plaguing him since the early morning, however much he tried to put the matter out of his mind it kept on creeping up on him and as soon as the excitement of the chase had abated it had felt as if claws were tearing his chest apart. Like any man born and bred in the north he not only believed in premonitions but he let them chew at him inside while he assumed outward indifference, played the fox showed off as if he had not a care in the world.

Three miles from the mouth of the Sym the Commodore steered towards the shelter of a shallow creek, rubbed himself with something to keep off the mosquitoes and then after laying out a rubber waterproof cape in the boat slumped down, burying his head in a padded jacket that stank of oil and fish hoping the sleep would drive away his fears and worries. He flaked out once. He woke up feeling unsure of where he was, his mouth had a bitter foul taste in it. He dipped his head in the water and shook it from side to side like a bear after he finds a bee-hive, rinsed his mouth out, spat the dirty water back into the river and after washing an old tin can in the water he scooped up some cold water and drank his fill. He felt fresher inside now and his mind

*A vision from a fishpond for me
 A glimpse of perfect summerland***

The Commodore's forehead started to sweat as he failed to strain to think who in Chash could possibly have written one like that. He puzzled over the poem but knew very little of the young people in the village now days. He then thought of a way to find the answer: he said he had heard those lines recited at radio, lines about a "radiant, fleeting dream". To his delight, a second warning, she came into the attack at once: "You should be ashamed of reading other people's letters. It's prying and crude! It's bad form! That's how people used to behave in the old days when they knew no better! Those sad verses were written by Alexander Sergeyevich Pushkin! That much you should be known at least!"

The Commodore simply worshipped his daughter, spent his and she responded to his affection. He had another daughter and a son as well, but they were like strangers to him, they were close to their mother and to be honest his household was like no families and Taika was the bridge between them. When he used come home drunk, sometimes he would be noisome. Then Taika would stamp her foot and say, "Commodore! Right the belt" which meant that he should go and sleep it out. He would be bitter, quarrelsome and awkward with anyone else, for her he was an obedient child: he never contradicted her but just did as he was told. Carrying on their game he would lift his hand to his droll sodden head in salute and say: "Aye-aye, right it is!" Then he would collapse onto the bed his feet turned upwards in their sock full of holes. Everyone else around him felt like tearing him to pieces but Taika would speak to him like a nurse to a patient & calm him down and then she would start to read him Yershov's *Little Humpbacked Horse*; she had got hold of a copy some where complete with pictures. He knew the poem almost by heart now

*"Now, these brothers planted wheat,
 Brought it to the royal seat,
 By which token you may know
 That they hadn't far to go."***

* Translated by Inna Zheleznova

** Translated by Louis Zehkoff



interrogations, but even more harassed by the separatists in the cell after the interrogations—he had set fire to the petrol, burnt the Red Army men, and perpetrated the wicked deed for which many innocent souls were suffering. He was the chief bandit. He let him admit at the interrogation that he was the leader. If he didn't, the separatists would choke him with a sheepskin or mattress.

But Grokhotalo did not dissemble at the trial, he told the honest truth about himself, thereby escaping the death sentence and receiving ten years hard labour followed by exile for life to the place where he did his labour. He helped to build a railway to the North, but never finished it, landing up in the settlement of Choosh to fell timber. When his ten years were up he settled there permanently, never going to the Ukraine even for a holiday, in fear that the Bandera men still at large would find him and do him in. Grokhotalo became a Siberian, although whenever he saw his native meadows on the films or heard Ukrainian songs, he grew gloomy, lost his composure, drank heavily and beat his wife. His wife, a strapping local woman who could stand up for herself resisted hard, scratching and screeching for all to hear: "Bandera! Fascist! Burnt people alive! Now he's after me!..."

Grokhotalo was in charge of the Choosh collective farm's pig-breeding unit, where he ran everything very smoothly. Even in bad years they bred excellent pigs and over-fulfilled the plan for supplying meat to the state, and Grokhotalo's photograph had burst out of its frame on the settlement Board of Honour. Although his bosses could not approve of his foul language and bad manners, they left him alone and closed their eyes to the fact that each year he kept a couple of nice hogs for himself at the farm—the conviction that there was nothing tastier than bacon was something he had earned with him from Klevtsy and never changed. Grokhotalo was not one for changing things.

Apart from bacon and himself, Grokhotalo recognised money, and was therefore always on the make. And in spite of the fact that he, a native of the Rovno lands, had a terror of deep water he nevertheless learned to catch fish, which he did not eat himself but sold down to the last pair of gills. Grokhotalo had been trained by the dear departed Kuzma Kuklin, a rogue well known in these parts. Kuklin was a puny man who had trouble with his stomach and coughed up blood after drinking bouts, so he always got the strong lads to assist him and had sent out many a skilled

young over pirate from under his wing. It goes without saying that Kuklin had no paternal feelings for his charges and did not go out of his way to teach them his skills. On the contrary, he would drag out his instruction in all possible ways and try to cheat them of their fair share of the catch. The one thing he was generous with was cursing. Most of the curses Kuklin knew were aimed at Grokhotalo. He unbundened his heart. But Grokhotalo put up with it and learnt to fish. He stopped recognising Kuklin as soon as he set up on his own.

The late Kuzma would shake his head and say to his "partners": "Mark my words, that chaff belly will come to a bad end. Very bad end! In our job we must all stick together, like one man."

God rewarded Grokhotalo for his patience, hard work and stamina, and the latter soon won a place near the famous ridge opposite the boulder the size of a bath-house lying in the grass. On the drizzling autumn night when the prow of a big barge hit the poachers' frail craft, Grokhotalo seemed to hear a shout in the darkness, but kept quiet and did not go to his teacher's aid. Having crushed the boat without even feeling the blow, the barge withdrew majestically into the night. Kuklin's cape got caught in the engine, so the fishermen believed, and he was dragged to the bottom. He has not been found to this day. His new helper rowed to the bank on the broken-off prow and never had anything more to do with the river.

The ridge, or the Golden Ridge as it was affectionately called, to which many aspired but did not have the nous to win a good spot, was at a count of three hundred if you went at slow speed from the bank. In spite of Kuklin's attempts to hide this, Grokhotalo also had the sense to count and immediately found the lucky spot. He acquired a Whirlwind outboard motor and a boat, without telling anyone where or how he got hold of all this sophisticated equipment. It's hard to buy a good engine and boat in the North even today, but at that time you needed a lot of clout to do it. Grokhotalo would speed along on his boat, puffing out his chest, everything child's play to him: the distance, the famous Golden Ridge and life in general.

Grokhotalo caught fish galore. He never said how many he took off each line, but it was obviously a lot, because he completely stopped drinking cheap wine and went to the best vodka at that. His face gleamed
me "A,
"

from fish oil, and his lips glistened like those of a town street gut. An uncastrated hog was what the local poachers called him. They were consumed with envy, and when one day there was a noisy splashing by Grokhotalo's boat and they realised that a sturgeon had got caught on his line they decided as a man: "That's enough! We must put an end to it! It's time the bastard was driven away from the Golden Ridge, time to cut his lines and drill holes in his boat. If he makes a fuss we'll scare him, if he won't be scared, we'll try something stronger."

While the thirst for revenge was gnawing at the poachers' hearts and breasts, greedy-eyes Grokhotalo was struggling on his own with a full-grown sturgeon. In a fit of temper he tried to tip it into the boat—God had not begrudged Grokhotalo strength, and skill he had acquired with the years. But as soon as the "big fellow" looked at the fisherman with its piggy eyes and threshed its tail like the rudder of an aeroplane, on the water, Grokhotalo's heart sank. He couldn't take it on his own, in mid-stream. Thanks to old Kuzma Kuklin, his swearing was employed to good advantage. After sticking another dozen hooks into the sturgeon's tail skin, Grokhotalo cut the anchor ropes and started towing the fish ashore. He rowed. Couldn't use the engine, 'cause the fish was so heavy and strong, it would break the line. Meanwhile the sturgeon came to, realised where and why it was being dragged, and started threshing its tail, diving under the boat and turning circles in the water. Feeling the ground under its belly, it went crazy, leaping out of the water like a dolphin and performing all sorts of circus stunts. The hooks broke and the nylon rings snapped.

Grokhotalo brought the exhausted, torn sturgeon ashore on two hooks, jumped out of the boat to catch it by the gills and recoiled: the huge sullen fish was lying on its side, flapping its gills the size of saucepan lids. It looked at the man with a weary calm. But Grokhotalo was not to be daunted now.

"Damn and blast!" he howled, catching hold of the sturgeon and dragging it onto the bank. He pulled it almost as far as the slope, the woods, then fell down next to it and lay on the pebbles, beating the fish's serrated back and head with his fist.

"Ha-ha! Got you! Got you! Ha-ha! Zer ve are!" This rejoicing was not enough for his exhilarated heart, so Grokhotalo jumped up and started stamping with his boots on the pebbles, shouting and waving his arms.

"Woe strengthens, happiness blinds"—many a time Grokhotalo

to the spot where the miscreant had to put his signature. Stuffing his complaint book and pen into the worn field bag that dated back to wartime, the fishing inspector tossed it onto his side with the familiar gesture of the commander, dragged the sturgeon into the boat, letting it fall with a bang on the metal bottom, then pushed himself off with an oar, and made for mid-stream, winding the starter cable round his hand.

For some reason the field bag made Grokhotalo particularly furious. Perhaps he remembered 'forty-five, an investigator with a field bag? Perhaps a strict camp in the North where the military had showed off with their bags. Or perhaps he remembered nothing, and was just seething with rage.

"Cowardly rat! Wix a field bag! We shed our blood!" and here Grokhotalo choked. He'd find out, that pig-faced police spy was sure to find out whose blood Grokhotalo had shed. That's what it was like in Choosh. You told your neighbour, and she told the hog, and the hog told the whole town; unable to control his feelings he began to curse the fishing inspector indiscriminately: "Let zat bloody sturgeon rip open your guts, you slob! Drown, drop dead, kick ze bucket. Let your kids rot in hell!" But again he chose the wrong words. Rumour had it that the "slob" had no kids. He lived alone and had lost his family in the war. A bastard like that wouldn't take the sturgeon, he'd hand it over to the Fishing Cooperative like he was supposed to.

But where, how was he to unburden his broken heart? And how was he to live? Why the blazes had he fought so strongly and hard for himself and this life, why had he suffered such torment? Why were there so many obstacles on his path? "Oh, muzzer dear! Muzzer dear!" Grokhotalo coughed the dear, comforting word out of his powerful chest. He longed for tears of assuagement and tried to squeeze them out of himself, but only pained his heart, the tears would not come, they had petrified inside him, and so the complaint to his long departed mother brought no relief. But in 'forty-five he had only to mention her for the tears to flow.

Grokhotalo came to in the boat, on the river, and once things have started to go wrong, that's it—now the engine would not start. The sun was going down behind the river, but when he had pulled the sturgeon out on the line it had been beating down on his back and head—he had lost so much time! The shops would close in Choosh, and then there would be nothing to drown his

obligingly but off the metal top and pulled out the plastic cork with his teeth.

They poured it out, drank and smacked their lips. The general verdict was "not bad", but again I was advised solemnly: "Next time buy two bottles instead of one" and also told, "Eat, drink, guest, but don't spill the beans". I promised "not to spill the beans". The men did not believe me, but they pretended to be satisfied, and turned the conversation to the weighty subject of how writers are paid and what percentage of the truth they can write in their works. They agreed on five per cent. In connection with the poachers' disappointment at the remuneration of our labour, mention was made of a device made to catch poachers at night. "Bet they paid the inventor of that filthy thing a packet." What was happening in the world? What was it coming to? Mas was driving himself to crazy things, putting himself in prison, and inventing the fence and barbed wire to stop him from getting out! "We're digging our own grave!..."

"Well, I'll be blowed!" the orators marvelled at this philosophical discovery.

"Now then, lads!" Akim interrupted the intellectual conversation, slapping his knees, his eyes shining expectantly. "Let's make a day of it!" And to a howl of approval he fetched the "fire extinguisher" from the bushes—a large bottle of cheap wine. So much for Akim! Had he got hold of the bottle without my knowing or did he keep a store here?

The Commodore rushed off somewhere in his boat when it was quite late. Smiling meaningfully, the poachers hinted that he was going to see Raissa. The shop girl was so "crazy" about the venomous Chechen that, in spite of the strict law on alcoholism, she opened the shop at night and sold him spunts, in return for which the Commodore gave her a squeeze, kissed her and dashed off, remembering the "lads", after promising to bring Raissa some fresh sterlet soon and have a "private" talk with her.

There was laughter, talking and mutual understanding, almost fraternity, on the bank of the Yenisei. The fire was bush up to the skies, and no mosquitoes could be heard. The fish soup bubbled in the pot, curled sterlet tails flying up in flames and sparks.

One had a go at singing, another at dancing, but most were kissing each other and crying.

"Enjoy yourselves, lads!"

"We only live once!"

smile condescendingly. "Can as I do I'm getting. Don't eat w'out you." He nodded at the river.

"I'm sick of grapple."

"Oh, f-g-h it! Now what can you do with her?" Akim held "I haven't got any beer!"

I held out my hand to him.

"Let's bet on it."

Akim did not see my hand. In his annoyance he took out a cup of tea and licked a tin—but this did not calm him down. He banged the "fire extinguisher" against a rock, and the gas flew in all directions, as if a mine had exploded. The Commander was already at the lowest line.

"You won't spill the beans, will you?" Akim asked Poleski, scratching an ear covered with mosquito bites.

"Won't what?"

"Spill the beans in the newspaper? The lady are afraid."

"Blow that! There aren't enough newspapers to do that!" And the more I cursed, the livelier Akim became. In a flash he dragged the grapnel, ropes and oars out of the bushes, admonishing me at the same time.

"Of course. If you're goin' to spill the beans, you should hit a go at everyone, not just us, eh?" and he winked a puffy eye at me. Seating me at the oars, so as to get out of the shallows and

Our line was being drawn in. Alim handed me the line and ordered me to clean the shadlars—the local word for rubbish—off the hooks. He told me to be very careful—move it and you'll have a hook through your hand.

And here was the line. Big, covered with a thin layer of dried oil and bent in an arc, it had no nooses, but a very sharp point and was attached to a nylon reinforcing rope by a nylon ring. On the curve of each hook was a foam rubber cork attached by a short ring. The corks made light, bucking movements. There were four or five hundred of these little "kys" on one line alone. At the upstream end of the line was a heavy anchor. Cast with the stream and weighed down in places by a light weight, the line also had an anchor at the lower end. Half the battle was to cast the line and fix it. The main thing was to find a good spot where there was plenty of fish, to get the snag and the current right, so that the corks moved and danced, attracting the fish to "play" with them or so that a big fish would be swept by the current from the snag and swim straight on to the sharp hooks. How many fish got caught on the hooks, tear themselves away to die a painful death or be mutilated for life—no one knows. The fishermen once put it at fifty per cent. But the fish that stays on the hooks is also badly cut and battered by the water, and soon gives up the ghost. Big fish that die on the hooks, especially sterlet and sturgeon, are not fit for consumption—white larva is produced in their fatty bodies and people think that the oxidation of the fat is caused by the drying oil on the hooks.

In the old days fish that died on the hooks was brought ashore

fish for grayling, and in the forest, when we stopped, he took a silence.

"I'll have to take away the fish, whether I like it or not. Kolya's relatives have told me to hand over the boat, engine and tackle in good order."

Relatives? There's relatives for you! Worthy children of a spider's nest! For many years Akim had known no other home but Kolya's house. They had built it, this little house, together. As he had brought the money he earned home, as if to his own house, he had taken the battered, worn-out boat engine apart and put it in, founded and soldered, repaired the boat, stopped it up, painted it, got in firewood for the winter. But now that his friend had departed from this life, they were showing him the door.

My fellow-countrymen have started behaving unlike Siberians in a cheap, mean fashion, after the funeral, and not ceh a Chooch.

"Never mind!" Akim tried to keep his spirits up. "Don't worry about the matter. I'll apply for Surnikha. A new saw mill is opening there. Got five trades, I have, so I can earn a living anywhere!"

A settlement had sprung up at the mouth of the small River Surnikha. There was electric street lighting, a club, a canteen, a kindergarten, living accommodation and proper pensions. People would start moving in the autumn, timber felling in the winter, and the remarkable thing was that everything was ready for the workers. It should always be like that—first provide a man with the right conditions, then ask him to do the job.

My thoughts raced ahead: what if they also started felling the timber in a sensible economic way, instead of slaughtering the forests? The talga round the Yenisei is boundless, it has a great deal of the overmature timber that our country's great economy needs so badly. And wouldn't it be nice if I came to visit Akim a five or ten years time, to visit the grave outside the old settlement where my brother, who worked himself to an early death, to my knowledge, knew much grief and little joy, lay under a currant bush, to go fishing on the Opankha, where we fished on that memorable occasion all together, and sleep to the murmur of the cedars and dark firs. My brother had heard it, his children hear it now and one day his children's children would hear it too.

wonder out dead mother was why she didn't ever put
pillow in the cradle. Ignorant spot and sped off a trail
back.

But even the silent figure of the elder U'mah by the door
a challenge to the Commodore. He ground his teeth and
find his lucky brother's lines and drive him from the river
or by creek or edge him into a spot where there wasn't
as a tiller.

Before the war in the middle of the summer French, Ki-
and Ngamians used to set up tents along the banks of the
reaches of the Yenisei and fish for caribou and fish. They
nets, putting pieces of smoked moose on the hooks. These
must have been very tasty, if the silly sturgeon swallowed
an almost bare hook. They always had bits of rag, but a
ribbon to the rods. But they like decorating everything, they
tate their clothes and shoes with all sorts of rubbish. And
whether it was because of these bits of rag or their love
they caught the fish by the tons. Seasonal workers from
parts with a contract for catching fish would fish by the
camps or islands and pick up two or three small sturgeon or
for soup, and that was all. Then, having overcome their
and conscience, they would begin to move their floats near
the natives' lines. "Why you doing that? Much fish swim
Why you go all over river? Why you tangle up nets?" The
moved from one spot to the next, losing valuable fishing time
the fish kept on biting, while the visitors from other parts
their nets exactly where the non-Russians had been fishing
pulled out empty hooks.

And now a local inhabitant, with fishing in his blood
become like the slob, as the scrounging visitors were called
Choosh, and lifted his hand against another man—not
another man, but his brother, and not only his hand, but his
The village wallowed in the scandal, transmitting the news from
household to household, bowling it along like a wheel.

The Commodore's wife would not put her nose out of the
house.

"What's the matter with you, boozed yourself off your nose
have you?" She went on at her husband. "Round the bend? Your
daughter's death wasn't enough for you. You want to knock
your brother. Might as well do in the lot of us while you're about
it."

One time I was even in Spanish were out to the American
look at his face. But we went up down to the river and
keep water home. The coming down the river was a good
downed on paper and some, some
making us, to show us the river
with an I got caught on the banks.

Spanish took some security
banned in the road. I was
it just right, what a real man
on the edge of the

fish to put
the eye of a man
just like the
frozen and walk
in your own land.

It was dark
on the bank, a fire
clearly visible even
clouds, dark air
of the river broke
fisherman went past
a lot of time and

spawn, which no other fish has either,—it was all disgusting, alluring, obscene.

And because of it, because of this wretched amphibian, a sea had forgotten the man in him. Greed had seized him. Even his childhood had dimmed, faded into the background, and it was much of one anyway. He had sat through four winters at school with difficulty and torment. In class at his desk, he would be writing a dictation or listening to a poem, but he himself was on the river, his heart was twitching, his feet were itching, the bones in his body were howling—it's bring, the fish, it's coming! As far back as he could remember, he was always in a boat, always on the river, always in pursuit of it, this bloody fish. His parents' meadow on the River Fetisova needed mowing. He'd never been in the library since his school days—too busy. He was chairman of the school parents' committee—till they threw him out and elected someone else—he never went to school. At work they had thought of making him a deputy to the village Soviet—he was honest and worked hard—then they dropped the idea—he fished on the quiet, poached, what sort of a deputy would he make? They wouldn't even take him into the people's patrol. Let them deal with the hooligans themselves, tie them up, reform them, he hadn't the time, he was always in pursuit. So what if people were run over and knifed, if crazy drunks ran wild in the village with guns and axes? They wouldn't get him. But they did. What about dear little Tarkal

You bastard, you devil! The car killed the lovely young lass just beginning to bloom, the flower bud, the dove's egg. In that last moment the girl had probably thought of her father, maybe she said the name of her dear old uncle. But what about them? Where were they? What had they done?

Again he remembered his grandfather. His superstition, fortune-telling and warnings. "When you catches a little fish, Zimka, hit it with a twig. Take it off the hook and hit it, then say: 'Send yer dad and send yer mum, send yer uncle and yer aunt, send yer grandpa's wife and aft!' Hit it, throw it back and wait. It'll do as you say." So he did hit the fish, in earnest at first, then as a joke when he got older, but hit it he did, because he believed all that poppy-cock—and he caught big ones too, but just try and work out who's the dad, the uncle and the grandpa's wife. A fisher all his days, lying twisted with rheumatism on the stove, his grandad would lay down the law endlessly in a voice that seemed to be

what I was doing... It was a terrible mistake..." "A mistake, was it? A terrible one! Ver-r-ry well! But mistakes must be paid for. Terrible ones twice over!" Her suitor did not give anything away, however, he walked and talked with his sweetheart, and even pinched her now and then, but only within the limits required by decorum.

Towards spring the military commander was recalled to the front. The mothers sighed with relief, and the passions and rumours died down in the village, Glakha began to come to life, she hadn't been herself at all.

At flood time, during high water, when the nights were very short and unsteady as they are in spring, the birds sang by the village and in the fields almost round the clock, our young cavalier took Glakha beyond the pasture land to a meadow finely flooded with spring water, pressed the girl against a willow tree nibbled by goats, kissed her hard, smothered her with caresses, and put his hand where he had been told to by the lads, who had been getting at him to even accounts with the "fickle wench". "No, no. You mustn't!" begged Glakha. "But the lieutenant can't. I'm doing my pre-call-up training. Just wait. Maybe I'll be a senior lieutenant!"

As soon as he mentioned the lieutenant, she dropped her hands.

At first he forgot about the revenge and the lieutenant and did not know what he was doing himself. It was only later, when the heat had passed, when the mist had cleared from his eyes, that the lieutenant shone out again in his memory, swarthy, in pleated boots, the medal and badge shining on his chest, the stripe for being wounded on active service flashing! How could he stand it? How could his jealous heart bear it? Looking round nervously, our cavalier did as he had been told by his older mates: he stood the submissive girl on the steep bank, made her face the river, and pulled down her flannelette bloomers dyed with a home-made dye and bearing odd, broken buttons. It was the buttons he remembered most clearly, because for a moment the poor female attire arrested his foul intentions. But by now he wanted to show off as a smart fellow who had tasted sin, and this gave courage to the callow youth. In short, he pushed his knee into the behind of the snivelling, trembling girl and sent her flying into the water. The dirty dog had brains—he chose a shallow spot, so that the inconstant lass did not drown by mistake, then listened and

ing to deceive yourself and others by pretending. Do you expect Ignatius to, really? What for? Nature is a woman too, free to teach his own, and to teach that which is God's. Free from yourself and from eternal pain, I will take all torment now for yourself and for those who at this very moment, on this earth, are tormenting woman, doing her things to her.

Ignatius Unable to control his own, he nevertheless hoping that someone would hear him, he cried hoarsely, brokenly, "Eli-e-a-ahha, forgive me." He tried to clench his fingers, but his hands were cramped rigid. A mist swam before his eyes from the effort and there was a deaf ringing not only in his head, but all over his body. "So I may accept more torment," Ignatius thought remotely and hung fire his hands, hoping the moment would come when his legs would go numb and let go of their own accord.

Night gathered over the man. The movement of water and sky, cold and gloom, everything merged, went still and began to petrify. He no longer thought about anything. All the agony, remorse, pain and torment had receded, and he was withdrawing into himself, slipping into another world, sleepily, gently, quietly. Only the one who had been there so long, on the left side of his chest, under the nipple, would not agree to this peace, he had never known it, had always guarded himself and his master, without switching off his hearing. The dense, mosquito-like buzzing was broken by an insistent, self-assured purring from the gloom—and something prodded and flared up under the nipple in the still not totally benumbed body. The man tensed himself and opened his eyes. It was the sound of the boat on the river. Even on that fatal verge, already removed from the world, he could tell the make of the boat from its sound and pride at his knowledge was his first feeling. He wanted to shout to his brother but life was taking control of him, arousing his mind. With its first spurt he ordered himself to wait—it would be a sheer waste of strength, and he only had a little left, to shout now. When the engine stopped and the fishermen began pulling up their lines, then he could shout till his lungs burst.

A wave from the passing boat rocked his boat, and the fish hit the metal. Rested and refreshed, it suddenly reared up, sensing the wave which had once lifted it out of the soft black spawn, lulled it to sleep in the days of quiet plenty, chased it gaily into the shadows of the river's depths, and sweetly disturbed it at breeding



fish soup and bread. But had been talking to the poet
Chomskov again.

Whenever I tried to tell about such fish soup I was
often soundly rebuffed. The same in every house. "I know
how my own soup tastes," you heard him say, "and I don't
want that sort of soup, because the only thing I can feel
about is a warm soup." The Russian in deep re-
verence the pot of soup is a few days old, and it is not
done but put in the pot. And it is not put in the pot
by chance, but as a matter of precision, because the
fish would absorb salt from an over-salted soup and make
it worse. That's enough of the kitchen and its secrets. It is
land and fishermen people have their own life and secrets
secretly for making fish soup. Although you would not
require such subtleties.

The holidaymakers were not making fish soup. They were
forming a religious fire. Tearing at the thought of the dish
food that awaited them, one of the young fishermen cleared
sterlet, while another hung on the stick, a round pot, the
soldier's helmet, in which there was potato, onion, a whole
leaf and a pepper corn—it must be a pepper corn, they knew
because ground pepper gives the wrong flavour. Two of the fi-
shermen were preparing their iron contraption for smoking
under the steep bank, and to begin with, as an experiment, to
"load" it with small fish, so as not to waste time later, when
sterlet came rushing in.

When the fish soup was ready, the holidaymakers car-
ried the pot on a flat stone, sat round in a fraternal circle, and
held out their cups.

"To the surgeon!" proclaimed the boys and downed the
precious drink, adorned not with stars, but with Arabic flour-
like golden wasps. The boy was just about to sniff his sleeve
ladle out the soup reverently, when he saw a boat speeding
the river. "The crafty buggers!" he slapped his bare thigh, kicking
a horse-fly in the process. "The goats! They can smell drink, like
a horse-fly blood!" And throwing the dead horse-fly into the
he ordered the bottle to be put out of sight.

The boat did not go past. It drew in right opposite the camp.
A dark-haired stranger with a bony, unsmiling face and an
officer's leather bag on his hip advanced towards the



THE RADIO

I would like to repeat here once again what I have said before: the radio is the best means of educating the masses, but it is not enough. I shall continue to do what I can to help in this work.

* * *

A few days before my departure for Siberia and the Far East I read an article in a central newspaper about a woman who caught a cow for drake in the Park of Moscow University and broke its neck. What I am sure I heard the unfortunate drake received on the radio. It was a radio trial of the offender. The trial took place in the presence of famous people, artists, some of course, parents. Mention was made, several times, of the Moscow drake who had taken a fancy to the zoo and washed it down with beer.

It is unlikely that either of the lady who had committed the crime tried to commit suicide—they're not very frequent radio and any form of public condemnation these days and probably only muttered "Won't do it again" and that all but consider it highly probable that their parents, who have conscience and less spirit, might have been affected. It is no joke when your child is put to shame before the whole world and all Moscow old-age pensioners included, yes in the case of the drake.

I am not opposed to educating people with the help of posters, radio and other powerful means of propaganda, but observing the poachers in Siberia, the lamenting of the peasants like so much supercilious, irritating and idle talk to me.

And as if only tramps and scoundrels let themselves go and committed evil deeds! In Naryn Territory on the Ob an official called to mend the wiring at the home of an official's local court discovered more than a hundred dead swans here "to air" in the attic. The overweight servant of the Naryn had a passion for swan meat, and swan down is very fashionable and expensive these days—fashion pussies use it for muffs and other items of dress, but this does not prevent them from a few tears to Saint Saens' sad music as they watch the

Hunting is hard work, and the people who go to hunt the taiga animals, make a living by it, and it is not a profitable business. And we are not doing it with them.

The autumn of nineteen seventy one was a long one all over Russia. Even in Siberia there was no snow until December—which is unheard-of. Hundreds of people accounted for by no one, registered numbers and none of the seasons and rules of hunting, devoted to the taiga River Sym.

Beginning in the Obi lowlands, the Sym flows past a thousand or so kilometers to pour its waters, later water into the Yenisei. From the lowlands of the Yenisei bank the River Tym flows conversely to the Obi, to Naryn. It is a little longer than the Sym and deeper—two brothers "in the same carnage travelling in different turns"—nature has distributed its water, riches and gifts. Out nature is just, wise and patient, but it should red that a deafened by the shots and blinded by the powder smoke.

The invaders advanced up the Sym, into the heart of the taiga on boats with barrels of fuel, crates of ammunition, food in the luggage compartments. There are no imper militia or population on the Sym, but the hunters still do hunt alone, afraid of one another, stealing along the river, to avoid oncoming or passing boats and turning into tribes hiding behind islands and little bays.

At one time there were hamlets, villages and trapping on the Sym, but the fishermen and peasant, tiller of the soil, was stayed there until the peasant—who is not only a reliable person—is the anchor of of the Sym and any man will table growing, forests, and drop cones o rooms; swan springs—all pole-cat, erm

The terrible

educated, but don't anger God! You're going away, but we're staying with God, so have mercy!"—"Ugh!" the pained "too" shook his head. "You prayed to a tree-stump, crossed yourself with two fingers, and you haven't changed at all since Tsar Lexus!" and changed the subject to "world politics".

There was no question of contradicting now, they were too afraid to cough in case they missed a word. "It's Germany that worries me most," the "offishul" announced anxiously. "It's beaten, of course, good and proper, but it's hiding, the snake keeping quiet. And just you tell me what's it's keeping quiet about!"—"Yes," the Old Believers tugged and pulled their beards and coughed loudly, "what a situation! It's in the evil waters that the evil ones hide..." And then asked anxiously "If say, some unbeliever was to march on Russia, would he get as far as the Sym or would he stop at the Kyrgyz?" To this day the Old Believers call all non-Russians Kyrgyz.

"Ugh," the highminded guest again became despondent. "In talking to them about one thing, and they go on about another. Ignorant lot..."

When issuing a hunter with the supplies to which he was entitled and collecting the pelts from him, the "offishul" assumed the air of a great benefactor. "I'll take first grade just out of respect for you," and brought out a new gun out of his store as if he were breaking it off his heart. "Don't tell a soul! Got it from Moscow, from special funds! I've got influence everywhere, brother!..."—"Yes, Zakhar Zakharych! I'll pray for you..."—"Look at these boots! Only Marshal Voroshilov wears boots like that, and a few other high-ups as well, but I managed to get them! Ammunition again! Ammunition's scarce these days. We're storing up for defence. If we've got enough powder, we need fear no enemy. It's rationed now, and they keep cutting down the allocation, things are hard, the Cold War's flaring up and up .. But for you, as a friend .."

The trusting hard-working trapper was overwhelmed by such honours and the special confidence in him. He handed over to Zakhar Zakharych sackfuls of pelts, meat, nuts, and sometimes even a pinch of gold which he had found "accidentally" in a spring, buttered up his "benefactor", and did not realise that guns and boots have long been available in any town shop, that they used black powder way back under Tsar Lexus to fire flint-lock rifles in defence of the homeland and the throne, and that for his



whips that were also hairy with immature fluff, and a hairy stalk looking just as if it had been caught round with a gristle, it supported the corolla of the flower, where a fine, transparent piece of ice gleamed.

The sun, which had freed itself from the dense fur of ice and was already high above the tundra, pressed every plant of the tundra's soft pile, driving them into thickets of low bushes or sweeping everything towards the lakes, to the water meadows. But this flower stood boldly on the wind-blown hill, where the thin, now moist crust of earth, not yet thawed completely, was feeding the shy, cobweb-fine shoots of mosses, the threads of dry grass and grey bilberry bushes, which seemed to have been born to a lethal dryness. One flower alone lived confidently, challengingly on the hill, not hiding in a blissful, sheltered spot, but going out boldly to meet the cold spells, the winds and the freezing, marrow-nipping gales, so frequent here in springtime.

The flower stood guard over the sun. Touching the piece of ice, the sun's rays collected in a point, as if in a lense, and warmed the flower's head, also wrapped in the hairy cobweb on the bottom of the flower's cup. The piece of ice melted a little, opening the festively shining petals of the flower, like gates, and then the cup, almost turning inside out with a lively jaw, presented its head to the sun and the piece of ice turned into a bright drop, refreshing and nourishing the flower and the seed ripening within it with itself. Until the departure of the sun, while the very last second of sunset remained, it breathed the warmth of the heavenly orb, turning its bright head after it; then the petals, warmed from below by their down, immediately closed tight and the head sadly drooped. But inside the flower, under the petals, the unseen work did not end. Through the vein of a rootlet stabbing into the permafrost the flower drew out moisture, turning it into a mirror-fine, transparent piece of ice, which in the morning would again catch and focus the rays of the sun in a point.

From morning to morning and from day to day work proceeded unseen by the world until the head was ripe. And when the petals faded, rolling themselves up limply and falling away, the central stem would crack, break off and let drop the rattling head and the wind would roll it across the tundra, peppering the ground with the black dust of seeds.

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The sun, which had freed itself from the dense fur of water and was already high above the tundra, pressed every plant into the tundra's soft pile, driving them into thickets of low bushes and sweeping everything towards the lakes, to the water expanse. But this flower stood boldly on the wind-blown hill, where the thin, now-melted crust of earth, not yet thawed completely, was lifting the shy, velvet-fine shoots of mosses, the threads of dry grass and grey bilberry bushes, which seemed to have been frozen to a lethal dryness. One flower alone lived confidently, challengingly on the hill, not hiding in a bluish, sheltered spot, but going out boldly to meet the cold spells, the winds and the freezing, marrow-nipping gales, so frequent here in

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From morning to morning and from day to day work proceeded unseen by the world until the head was ripe. And when the petals faded, rolling themselves up limply and falling away, the central stem would crack, break off and let drop the radiant head and the wind would roll it across the tundra, pepping the ground with the black dust of seeds.

however, she never could completely master the difficult science of struggling against want. The one thing she didn't need to be taught was to love children and every living person easily, cheerfully and without care. Even during the hungriest winters she did not wish the children were dead, indeed, the very idea of death—a delivery from misfortune, tribulation and need never occurred to her, and it was probably because of that that there were no losses in the family.

The Kasyan kids, as they were called, grew up in freedom without restrictions or supervision. For them the greatest concern and joy was to survive until spring, until the sun, until the warmth, the fish and the berries, and the whole of Bogand waited for spring as for the mercy of God. Locked in a damp airless hut which was up to the chimney in drifts and cut off from the rest of the world by snow, the family endured many miserable winter months which, to the children, seemed like years! And then, at last, some of them in rags, some quite bare-tummied, the children climbed out, dirty, from their soggy, stinking burrow into the world.

Blinded by the bright light, choked by the burning fresh air, the brood of children did not jump or rejoice. Wiping their red, streaming eyes with their little fists, the children looked mistrustfully around, their mouths open, gums bleeding from scurvy, presenting their pallid faces to the life-giving warmth and stretching out their hands to the sun. Their heads swam and the bright light hurt their eyes as they perched on the earthbank by the house, their legs tucked under them, feeling the life-giving warmth with their enfeebled nappers, smiling and beginning to doze; those who were stronger, although they were pale, too, with blood dried on their lips, hobbled on weakened legs to the still high Yenisei, swollen by the first free wave of water. They did not wash themselves, but felt the water with the palms of their hands and their hearts began to beat rapidly and unevenly within them from the living, healing water and they splashed themselves, squealing, and tried to laugh.

Their mother fetched a pair of scissors and sheared the children as if they were sheep, right there on the bank. The wind picked up the hair, which was almost pitch-black, and carried it away into the water. Only the two first-born—Akimka and Kasyanka had their father's hair—the unknown Kasyan had subdued the wire-thick Northern hair to his own strong stock.

them, chattered all kinds of nonsense. Everyone in the hut was cheerful—they had got through the winter!

Feeling strange to themselves, light, clean, a little ceremonious even, the children were allowed out by their mother and hard on hand, led by fair-haired Kasyanka, they wandered beyond the settlement and the little Boganida river and scattered over the bank, brown from last year's decay, to hunt for edible herbs: sharp-tasting shoots of wild onion, pale leaves of coriander and shoots of bushes in rotted heaps of washed-up rubbish and filth of rolled-up moss and old sedge; they chewed and chewed the green stuff with loose bleeding teeth, screwing up their eyes from the pain. Sometimes they were lucky and found the nests of sea gulls or wagtails, picked out eggs from them and drank them on the spot without concealing their booty from each other. When they returned home, it was not with empty hands: each carried a bunch of soft and tender onion leaves squeezed in his fist and handed it over to the senior female, the keeper of the hearth—their mother—with the shy and proud silence of the bread winner.

The fishing artel arrived in Boganida before the snow had melted, prepared tackle, tarred and pitched the dinghies and sewed boats, made oars and repaired the fish depot. Kiryaga Wooden Leg, the depot manager, roused himself from hibernation and from carousing, and set about running things, bawling his words like, flying about the settlement like an eagle and giving orders, but, as always, no one paid any attention.

With a holiday smile, humming whatever came into her head, dressed up and made up, the mother, each int, went off to the depot to sign a dokumant—contracting her to work for the season as a cutter and Kiryaga Wooden Leg's assistant. Now the life of the family would begin to run smoothly—the mother would draw for all summer, register the catches and quarrel with Kiryaga.

From all the busy kids imperceptibly penetrated into the depot and flew straight to the stove, which was broad based and clumsy but was, on the other hand, also hot. Bread for the entire artel was baked in it, the artel's food was cooked in it and everyone dried their shoes and clothes and cured themselves of

and people love each other, sing and make kiddies. You'll be when you grow up you'll begin to play around a little, too. We have you turned away, then, eh? Oh, what a shy one he is! Not like me!" And with a chuckle she tickled Akimka's tummy.

Well, what would you do with her? It was true that Kovalchuk had grown and helped her a little. But the main salvation for the family lay in the fact that the custom of feeding all the children of Boganida without distinction on the fish soup boiled for the arbel workers had been maintained since the war. Many children had lived and grown up on that soup, become men and gone their separate ways into world, but they never forgot the arbel bowl. And, indeed, it was impossible to forget something like that. This was a holiday, always longed for, continuing daily from the very beginning of spring to late autumn, and like every holiday it was always in some way unique.

Long before evening and the hour when the dinghies and round-browed, long-nosed seine boats would appear round the sandy spit, the smaller inhabitants of Boganida were already on the bank, ready, waiting patiently and silently for the fishermen. Sometimes the children would forget themselves and begin to run and play and then suddenly stop and fall silent for fear of missing the most joyful moment—the appearance of the first boat. A little way away, the dogs lay on the ground. They were waiting for the fishermen, too, concentrated and serious. At this time of day they didn't squabble.

The brood of the Kovalchuk kids basked on the warm sand, one and all, in the unsetting sun. Akim carried three of his brothers, who were not yet big enough to wear trousers, on his back and clamped them on the sand. Together with the other bachelors and old-eyed youngsters, the little ones sprawled there, warming themselves of sand on their companions' head and shoulder as it tickled. No one ever hid in the shade in Boganida, everyone was out in the open, in the wind, in the sunshine among people and animals. The mosquitoes were less of a nuisance there and it was warmer. People had more than enough of sitting and freezing in the dark during the winter.

On the Kovalchuk's porch, for instance, perched on the roof of the porch, there was a long board table placed on the supports. The table had been set up right by the water in

education. If you've an education, even when you have a wooden leg and the other leg has no toes and is filled with iron which moves about in it and doesn't let you sleep, all the same you won't go under and you'll become a headman. The trouble was that the head of the fish depot often fell sick, red lumps came up on his damaged legs and then Kiryaga would howl and the wretches would pour spirit into his mouth to dull the pain. Once a piece of shrapnel came out of him. Kiryaga showed it to everyone—a little fragment like a piece of coal. "Maybe it's the last!" Kiryaga asked with hope in his voice.

As well as being boss of the fish depot, Kiryaga Wooden Leg was also a deputy to the Plakhin settlement council and brought the mail from there, showed films on holidays and election days and delivered speeches at every meeting.

"I can do a thing or two!" Kiryaga Wooden Leg would say, beating himself on the breast.

"Yes, but not everything!" the pert fish-cutters teased him.

Kiryaga Wooden Leg would burst into tears if he was drunk or lay into people, when he was sober he would just slam the depot door and go and complain to Kasyanka. Kasyanka understood and pitted him more than anyone. "Any fool can make children!" she would say. "You don't need any brains for it, but just try to show films or make speeches! They're no good at that! And a Red Army Order! And a medal with a tank on it, 'For Courage', has any of them got that? And a badge with a red flag, a 'Guard' badge, all in gold! It's even more beautifuller than a medal! And a certificate of gratitude written by the very top general: 'For the Destruction of Enemies of the Socialist Motherland by Accurate Fire'. Have they got that? No, they haven't! All they're good at is barking at each other like dogs, smoking tobacco and supping vodka. No shame and no conscience. They should have learned a thing or two from an educated man! I'd like to see them fighting at the front, like him, shedding their blood for the country! How can they talk like that? Ulcers is what they should have on their poisonous tongues, that's what!" Kiryaga shook his head, stunned by the flood of his own merits and virtues. "Khasyanka! What did the damned nazith do to me? I could have been your fa-ather..."

Kasyanka squeezed the former military sniper's nose with a rag, ordered him to blow and he blew his nose, like a kid, presenting his face so that the girl could wipe away his tears. As she tended Kiryaga Wooden Leg Kasyanka assured him that he was just the

same as a father to them anyway, better even than a father. She, Kasyanka, would never leave him. When Kiryaga the front-line soldier became old and sick from his wounds, she would make him clothes, wash him and feed him. "Oh, Kasyanka, what a silly thing you are!" her mother would say, roaring with laughter and pointing her finger at Kiryaga Wooden Leg. "Him, a fa-ather?" You really are just a little girl, who doethn't underhtand anything at all about family life!"

Kiryaga Wooden Leg didn't agree and entered the dispute.

"Khasyanka may be a little girl, but she's got more up top than you have, you scatterbrain."

After coming down to the shore Kiryaga Wooden Leg shut himself in the fish depot, where he had a comfortable room. On the wall, just as in a club room, hung an honorary certificate, posters depicting fish and tins of fish and a wall newspaper headed "For a Top-notch Catch", which had been drawn by a slippery character who drifted into Boganida. He had shirked the work of the team and concerned himself solely with the cultural recreation of the artel and nipped the fishermen off at cards. He had been savagely beaten for the disgusting deed of luring the small daughter of a visiting Evenk hunter to the cemetery and trying to rape her and sent off under a strong guard.

Kiryaga Wooden Leg threw the door of the fish depot wide open, so that the posters and the honorary certificate on the walls stirred, the invoice book on the table in the corner flew open and a black sheet of carbon paper blew on to the floor, and surveyed the scene with the finicky gaze of a master. He banged his wooden leg on the planking and paced back and forth a few times, checking the "premises" entrusted to him.

"Khasyanka! Akimka! Come here! At the double!" he called sternly, like a colonel in the movies. Kasyanka darted up, not running but really flying on long bird's legs to the big chief. Akim snorted and shrugged his shoulders, letting the other kids know that he wasn't taking any orders from Kiryaga Wooden Leg, but he, too, went into the fish depot. Giving the children a stern and important glance, as if assessing whether it was possible to entrust such treasures to people of their breed, Kiryaga Wooden Leg extracted a birchbark container of salt, a tin of laurel leaf and some pepper corns.

his work forgotten, looking with tired eyes into the fire and drawing on a cigarette. Then he came to and glanced at the cauldron filled with water. Laurel leaves floated in one and his pepper, clearly visible against a handful of coarse salt that was still not dissolved, dotted the bottom of the cauldron. This was a provisional amount of seasoning; adding more spices and bringing the flavour of the fish soup up to full strength would come later.

After tipping sterlets, still alive but now flapping feebly, on to the beach, the duty man firmly squeezed the head of a large drunkenly struggling burbot and pulled out, through its gills, a copper-yellow liver, which opened out wing-like; and it was called *maksa* in that part of the world. In rallying the fish the chief "did not notice" the empty bellies of the burbot, flapping like rags and wrinkled as if just after giving birth. That was breaking the rules, of course, because the burbot had no ribs whatsoever without the *maksa*, but you couldn't cross the artel the artel was a power. After having dealt with the small fry, the duty man caught up a nelma by the top of its gills, dragged it out of the water, soiling the sand with the silver of its scales, and delicately scored the springy, pearly white belly of the fish with a sharp knife.

Alom and all the other older lads sorted the fish, trying not to step or, God forbid, spit on the seine-net—that would spoil the tackle's luck—and watching from the corner of their eyes how things were going with the fish soup, what was going into it today, sticking up their thumbs and exchanging glances when they noticed what a fine fat nelma the duty man was cutting up. After cutting a large fresh piece, flowing with juice, from the tender under-fin, the duty artel member chopped it up on a log into bits and handed them round to the little ones like sweets; they chewed the fresh fish so quickly and greedily that the fat was squeezed out on to their lips.

The cauldron gurgled and cooed and even splashed over into the fire. The fire quietened a little, began to hiss and then promptly aroused itself, crackled and rose up, reaching the convex bottom of the cauldron, taking hold of it with a flexible stem and blossoming out in a bright flower in the centre of which darkened the poppy head of the cast-iron cauldron. The little kids, bare-foot and still quite shaky on their pins, swarmed around the blaze, and

Don't plunge in too deep, the heron's wife told you that! Who'll be your team leader now, warned sternly, sliding down the rocky waste below. But what was to be? The river fish were so to the more the fish dived about in the water, raised plunging into it. The water by the shore was turbid, covered scales, fish guts, slime and the sandy loam at the bottom.

When the received this responsible an project kitchen manner became so important that the shovelled and gave no orders by the fire than Kasyanka Wooden Leg did in the kitchen. She wanted the fire kept stoked up and gave instructions that one should pig her hand or get in the way or under her leg for the greatest mist among the her, a little boy called Gudge seized by a burst of enthusiasm for work and all forth doing onions with a razor-sharp knife on the blade of an onion, at a running onto his lips from nervous tension. Gudge's sister, a younger than Kasyanka, put the small cauldron by and let it reach so that, when the time came to mix it with onion, there would be no need to run and look for a vessel. This was a very important moment, seaming the soup. *Solot* *maki* was removed in a scoop, thrown into the small cauldron and mixed together with onion. The yellow, steaming substance was then shaken back into the large cauldron and the fish were marvellously seasoned and already possessed of a staggeringly nutritious aroma, simmered like rising dough that was about to run over the edge from the force swelling it and from its complete readiness.

The duty man hauled gutted, washed and dismembered fish in a basket to the fiercely boiling cauldron, around which hard leaves rushed and in the centre a crater of white foam revolved, in which pepper corns, small pieces of charcoal, grey rags of ash and mosquitoes whirled. The bifurcated tail of an enormous netra gleaming moon-like, stuck out of the basket; the wings of sterlets still fluttered and rustled against the twigs and a small elegant taimen shone brown. After sampling the still lenten broth with a ladle for salt and giving a satisfied wink to Kasyanka, who was tensely awaiting sentence on one side, the duty man pitched the fish into the cauldron with a splash. The cauldron, a moment before bubbling and seething, was seized by drowsiness, the

if to say, don't try to get it, it was given to me, and eat the fish trying to crunch softly.

And then an aroma of fresh fish wafted along the shore, but as yet but already mouth-watering and as Kasyanka ground the *maksa* and flung seasoning into the cauldron and the fish swelled and thickened, absorbing fat and bitter onion juice, pieces of fish seemed to frost over and fish heads became eyeless; such a dense smell of nourishing broth, now simmering on a low fire, was carried to people that the kids' throats contracted as one, making swallowing movements, and they kept their eyes fixed on the *nelma* bladder floating at the top, white and looking like a green wasp—this was a delicacy which the duty man would share with them if he felt like it. Drawing the air in with their noses, the members of the *artel* yelled to one another: "It fair makes your loaf spin, you want to get some grub in you so much!" and "The smell! knocks you off your feet!" "Come on, get your soup, you slow coaches!" cried the team-leader, hurrying up the people.

"One man's meat is another man's poison!" said the duty man, winking at the famished youngsters sitting round the cauldron, after tasting the broth in a ladle. "And what fine fellows you are, kids." The duty man reflected for a moment, then, as if despairing, waved his hand, levered up a *nelma* bladder with the ladle and flung it into the outstretched palms of the smallest aspirant—Gudge.

Gudge sniffed back the white thread hanging from his nostril, tossed the bladder from one hand to the other, blew on it with protruded lips and began to crunch it vigorously, as if he was chewing a turnip, while the kids looked at him enviously. Tears pricked the eyes of some, but the duty man, even though half stupefied by the fragrant broth, left grief no place but threw open his wadded jacket, stuck two fingers in his mouth, sent a rattling whistle along the shore and supplemented this summons by bellowing at the top of his voice:

"Shift your stumps, those of you with money in your pockets. Sup your soup and loop the loop!"

"Come on, it's time!" replied the fishermen. "If you're so hungry tomtit even your crop's upside down."

The *artel* members finished unloading the fish in a rush, jollyng each other along. Then all of them, large and small alike, washed their hands with sand. The youngsters elung to the edge of the shore, a line of grey mice catching water with red paws; it

clutched his chunk of bread so demonstratively and proudly (it looked like a cedar cone) he hadn't eaten it but had been battling against temptation and declaring proudly by his appearance. "I've got my own bread".

"Your own bread" represented a bit of help for the making the fishermen's life easier, for rations were issued. Boganida in the form of flour. Morygachikha baked up bread for the artel members and everyone else baked it in their huts as best they could. The flour lasted the Kasyan kids for a week or so. Flat cakes smoked on the stove, stew bubbled in an iron pot and pancakes, fried in fish oil, crackled in the frying-pan—you could eat until you burst! Come on in, anyone, "thit down and have a bite!" After that—finito. The cupboard's bare.

The mother of the Kasyan kids was keeping indoors again. There was a reason for this and everyone knew it, just as they knew why Kasyanka was ingratiating herself, why Akinka was going out of his way to help the fishermen and why the Kasyan kids clung to the back of the queue, averting their eyes from other people and from the bread which, like their plates and spoons, the kids also kept in all sorts of places—in their pockets, under their shirts or in a cloth bag. The Kasyan kids and the others who lacked backbone and ate up half or even the entire bread ration while they waited impatiently for the fleet to return from the fishing grounds had to be given some bread; the team-leader sighed, but there was no getting away from it—for the workman there was work to do and for the hungry man—bread.

Gudge stretched both arms upwards as if praying to a pagan god, a bowl in his hands; he did not come up to the artel cauldron in height. Koryaga Wooden Leg tried to object: everything, he said, should be as it is with the nomads in a northern pasture—the first person to be served, especially when hot reindeer blood was being drunk, was the hunter, the most necessary person in the camp, then the young men and after them old men and the women—the good-for-nothings. The others got it into Koryaga Wooden Leg's head that he wasn't dealing with some half-savage encampment: this is a work-team, they said, and a Soviet one at that. In the Soviet land everything was always given first to children and should be given to them, for children were our future. Koryaga Wooden Leg shut up and although he was the big boss he got his food after the children from that day on; however, he always hurned everyone up, cursing and impatiently squeaking

the straps fastening his wooden leg. The reason for his haste was that, before supper, that is, before the fish soup, the ariel members drank a glass of vodka, and it was not only Kiryaga Wooden Leg's insides that burned and smoked with impatience, but it warmed, his wooden leg, too. Nevertheless, he had to wait and wait he did, rattling the mess-tin which Kasyanka had burnished.

"Well, even a fly must eat!" said the duty cook, swirling the ladle sharply round the cauldron, and deposited a large piece of fish in Gudge's bowl. The youngster's arms sagged under the weight and, forgetfully, he again stretched the thread from his nose to his lip.

"Hold it! Hold tight!" his mates called encouragingly to him from the patient queue.

"Don't teach your granny to thuck eggth!" grunted the refractory fleet-member in a tense whisper and froze in expectation of a second run at the cauldron. The duty man would ladle out fragrant broth from the top of the cauldron, where fragments of *maksa*, onions and fat floated, and say as he upended the ladle over the bowl:

"W-e-e-ll, you are a lucky little bloke! Y-e-e-s, a lucky little bloke! All the tasty grub has come your way! Come on, young fellow, tuck into the fish, it'll make you stronger on your feet! Vex!"

Breathless from the smell of the fish soup and the knowledge that he had been given "all the tasty grub", Gudge wrinkled his scalp in the effort not to stumble and walked with tiny steps, scraping the sand with his torn little boots, towards the ariel table, the hot bowl burning his hands. But he endured the pain and did not drop the food, the expectation of which had contracted all his weak, childish insides, not yet hardened by endurance, and made them shudder. The boy's mouth overflowed with agonising saliva from a tigerish impatience to seize the food, gulp down the burning broth and bite off a big chunk of bread. . . Darkness rose up before his eyes: his palate went numb and the sticky saliva would not stay in his mouth—faster, faster to the table, but the bowl was burning his hands, burning—he couldn't hold out! Oh, he couldn't hold out! He would drop it, drop it right now! Despair gripped the boy, tears blinded him, he was on the point of dropping the bowl on the ground and tumbling over himself. .

"Let me take it!"

Kasyanka! That was the reason Kasyanka was in Boganida, to



spoons on bowls and the sniffing of noses were heard, the warm blissfulness of food spread through the insides of the small fleet members, who had remained alone with themselves and their bowls and although the spoons were small, the catch was big and things went swimmingly

The men encouraged their small companions with table adages: "Large or small, they eat with a will!", "Eat, boys, and put on muscle!", "A mill works by water, a man by meals", "Fill yourself with pork and you'll a fighting cock" and many others in a similar spirit, which one is forbidden elsewhere to utter in the presence of children, but which sounded quite ordinary in Bogatida. The word "fish", which effortlessly forms associations with every other word, went around the table as a separate after-dinner joke the fishermen could not resist

"There are children around," Kasyanka reproachfully shook her head, pointing with her spoon at the kids.

"And ladies!" the team-leader winked slyly at the arid members, displaying a bulbous medicine bottle containing spirits. "Well, boys! Without bread you can't work and without wine you can't dance, as they say. Drink before the fish soup, while you're eating it, after it and while you're remembering it!"

There was a ripple of excitement around the table and some restrained chuckles. An aluminium beaker passed from diner to diner; after draining it, one fisherman would grunt, another merely wipe his mouth with his fist, a third chase his drink with some food, crunching the onions, while yet another would come out with some appropriate saying—for example, coffee in the morning, sailor's dawning, vodka at night, sailor's delight. But by now the jokes and conversations had somehow gone flat and people seemed to talk with an effort, for just as there is a time for work and a time for amusement so, too, there is a time for eating.

The team-leader was the last to drink from the beaker: he sat at the head of the table, host and paterfamilias, concerned firstly for his family and only then for himself. Kiryaga Wooden Leg stuck out his neck, watching the spirit in the bulbous bottle diminish before his very eyes: what if there wouldn't be enough for him? The team-leader slowly, very slowly shoved a glass jar that had held egg-plant paste towards him, clinking the aluminium beaker against it:

"Good health, snper!" he said and described a semi-circle with the beaker, nodding his head. "Here's a health to the entire honest company."

and there were fewer mosquitoes to split and salt fish.

"If I'd got theven more fascists they'd have given me a Hero's medal! And what made me choothe another path?"

"Maybe you were tiddly?" the women baited Kiryaga Wooden Leg

"Me? Have you any idea of what you are thaying? A thapo must be ath cool ath a cucumber on the firing line! When he cometh off the line, then have a drink and relax if you want!"

"Well, then, you must have been in a hurry?"

"Where to?"

"To get your teeth into a cucumber!"

"Ah-h, dithcutthing thomething with you ith like trying to talk to a bunch of convicth! No rhyme or reathon." Kiryaga Wooden Leg despaired of the women and issued the stern order: "There is it that it'th ath clean ath a hothptial here, underthtand?"

"Off you go now, boss, and don't you be at a loss!" replied the women, bursting with laughter.

Kiryaga Wooden Leg spat. "What sort of people are you! What sort of people are you, then?" and he rushed off up the hill in a series of bursts. The hill was what people in Boganida, like people everywhere else, called that part of the bank which had been undercut into steps and which emitted the icy breath of permafrost. Kiryaga Wooden Leg stood sadly stock still on the hill, looking into the distance and remembering the war and his war buddies. The further into the taiga you went, the thicker and more somnolent the stifling vapour from the frozen ground became as it drew the open expanses and the low, multi-coloured vegetation into itself and mingled with the mist from lakes and rivers. A thick blanket also wrapped itself around the immobile figure of the former sniper, his right shoulder hunched and a medal pinned to his wadded jacket.

Akim splashed water from the bag holding the seine nets, scraped out the rubbish, fish scales and guts, put the planking back in place, stacked up the oars by the fish depot, hammered the rowlocks with an axe and waited for the duty man to go to bed. The latter did not make him wait long. Scratching and yawning enormously, he asked

"Everything cleared up, then?"

"Every thingle thing!"

"Nothing to keep me, then?"

"No, you can go!"

shore? Irritation and pity, despair and anxiety tore the young fellow, who sometimes wanted to curse in the language of grown men. "Well, then," he wanted to say to his mother, "was having fun, dancing and making babies a good thing, then? What are we going to do now, eh?"

A sick person, acutely sensitive to everything, the mother, who had turned from an adolescent into an old woman, sought to redeem her guilt by patience and by trying to work hard. Holding the side of the boat, she would move across to the planks and stand over the net in raincoat and wet boots, biting her wailing and cries into her lips and mechanically paying out the line. But her attention no longer lasted long. She often dropped the net or stopped moving her hands, as if falling asleep over the net, and then her "eldethi" would cast a furtive glance at her—not a look but, to put it bluntly, a dagger. She would seize the net, frantically moving her hands, but she was no longer capable of pulling the fish from the wet mesh, her fingers wouldn't bend and her neck wouldn't bend, when she leaned over, her head would lurch and she would poke her nose into the wet mass of fish. "What's going on with fish, seeming to play, to be hiding, hiding beneath her brow and all the time her lips, torn from begging relief from her misfortune. "Neither wounds in the bold heart and in the bones." "Is! The only key of the archangel me." "Lord, pretherve and be merciful, my own.

"talking about, unbeliever that you are?"

"being angry, and immediately curb himself and your mother was a Dolgan"

god, lad, that's what the women say,

or meekly, lowering eyes that were baked and perceived, even if not completely and if

had to believe in something, had to rely in order to survive. She had become used

people, but the people had gone away from as nothing left for her to do but to trouble

that wronged him greatly and sinned much in merciful countenance towards her

the mother, breaking down once and for

to the fishing-grounds. And then the

and trembling with rage, drove his

two younger brothers into the boat: if they could gorge fish, they were big enough to catch them.

Kasyanka was left at home as housekeeper and nurse, so wasted that every one of her bones seemed to shine through her skin. Lack of sleep and work beyond her strength made her head spin and her nose bleed and her arms ached like those of an exhausted grown-up woman. Akim knew that even the irrepressible Kasyanka was on the verge of falling ill and then all of them would be lost.

A launch came from up-river, meeting the flocks of birds that were already flying away, and with it came Afimya Mozglyakova for the stores and the stock. She visited the Kasyan kids, looked over the mother, who was whispering in delirium: "Neither illness .. only key .. neither wounds nor pain..." and shook her head.

"You've had your fun, my girl. The mortal springs in you have been opened. You'll have to go to hospital right away." And she took the mother back with her in the launch, saying that the collective farm would send for the Kasyan kids.

The patrol craft *Bedovy* was already moving through the slushy ice, picking up buoys from the river and switching off the signal shields. As usual, it put into Boganida—for fish, the Kasyan kids thought. But a man with a very familiar, blackened wooden leg came down the steep, slippery gangplank, holding on to the wooden ribs and advancing backwards. When he reached the bank he scooped up as many of the kids as he could and buried his naked, wet face in their coarse hair, repeating in a voice choked with tears: "Orphanth, poor little orphanth!" Whether from grief or drink or a cold Kiryaga Wooden Leg's voice failed and all that could be heard was "or-or-or", so that the kids could not make out what he was saying or why he was in tears.

The Kasyan kids were hastily loaded on board the *Bedovy*. They were happy to sail away from a deserted Boganida and ran around the decks, playing and laughing. Although they stopped the children, trying to feel grief, Akim and Kasyanka couldn't manage it either: they were used to living without grief and without looking into the future and anyway, the word "death" did not tie up with their mother. It was impossible to believe that she had been their mother and then, for some reason, somehow, she had ceased to be. A person like their mother could only be alive.

Kiryaga Wooden Leg took Kasyanka off to a trade school to learn to whitewash and paint houses. All the other Kasvan kids

were sent away from Plakhino by the rural council in an aero plane to the Yenisei orphanage. Only Akim stayed back, nurturing a dream of joining the crew of that splendid ship, the *Bedovy*.

He spent the winter hanging about in the town boarding school on a state allowance, studying in fits and starts and spending most of his time not at school, but by a creek, helping voluntarily and unselfishly to free the *Bedovy* from the ice and refit it. He learned the fascinating history of this apparently grim and unprepossessing vessel, as well as its ways and everything else about it, to the last detail. The crew became fond of the lad for his hard-working nature and his devotion to the river life and he could no longer conceive of his life without the *Bedovy*, which did the most important job on the river from early spring until autumn.

When the ice began to melt, the crumpled, beat-up, scraped little boat fearlessly trudged northwards up the river, lighting the signal shields on the banks and littering the water with red and white buyos. As Akim saw things, there was not and could not be a path up the river until the *Bedovy* had done this job. Squeezed out by the ice, the *Bedovy* was the last to leave the river, collecting buyos that were by now worn and storm-battered, their paint peeled off during the summer. Sometimes it did not manage to slip away into the creek in time, but froze fast in the ice in some uninhabited spot. However, the crew did not abandon their home vessel. Instead, they made dug-outs in the bank, guarded the *Bedovy*, freed it from the ice, prettied it up as much as they could, freshening up the name and the wheelhouse with paint and burnishing the loud-hailer, the engine, the wheel and the quarters, raised the ship on wooden rollers and hauled it with the help of the ship's winches into a clear spot, bay or an unused channel—in short, to a place where the ship would not be crushed by the ice in spring.

The channel-marking supreme on the *Bedovy* was Paramon Paramonovich Olsufyev, a man of quite unapproachable importance, whose outward appearance was such that it would have been impossible to employ him on other ships, particularly passenger vessels: he would have frightened off all the passengers with his face and, especially, his voice. It was to him that the crew brought the lad; they had, incidentally, decided in advance what to do with him, but they wanted to put the new boy through the same "grilling" to which Paramon Paramonovich had, at one

wave-licked bank. His native shore was overgrown with scrub bushes and a mat of grasses and moss, merging with the tundra. The huts of the settlement had sunk into the earth and red graveyard grass had taken their place: warmwood it was called. From somewhere the fluff of willow-herb and sticky nettle seed had come. They had never grown there previously—probably had been brought on a barge and the seeds had remained, lying in wait until desolation set in. The hut in which Akim had grown up and in which his brothers, sisters and mother had lived was gone—in spring the ice had shifted it off its foundations, sand had spread over the hollowed-out site and rotten beams were now strewn about in the willow bushes. The back of the artel shed had been broken, its spine cracked, and it had fallen in, pushing over the windows and bristling with broken planks; beyond the collapsed wall of the shed the white Russian stove was visible, criss-crossed with beams. In Mozglyachikha's shed the gaudy plaster had come off to expose the packed splinters beneath a diamond-shaped pieces. Akim's heart contracted, not at the sight of the flapping, grey roofing felt, or of the two pillars of the cross piece, or of the litter and the tangled grass, but at the stubborn whiteness of the stove, which, even though abandoned, had not given up. And at the sight of the booth, too—unnoticed, formerly tucked bashfully away, it stuck out and was now the main structure. Ships took sightings from it, for it could be seen from far off. The steamboat whistle stuck up steadfastly above the ruins of the shed, looking like an aerial, the bits of wire whipped in the wind resembling tangled hair; two stumps from the artel table could be seen in the sand and two sea-gulls stood on them, their legs crossed. A little higher up a rusty wedge of the cast-iron cauldron cut like a ploughshare into the fronds of grey grass known as *redoded*.

Akim registered all these small details in passing. He did not, could not, tear his eyes away from the stove, glimmering in the depths of the empty shed like a white screen, and saw pictures of his recent childhood. Here, on this shore, the artel people had swarmed from spring to winter, Koryaga Wooden Leg had roared like a colonel, fair-haired Kasyanka had learned songs and life, fish soup had cooked in the work-team's cauldron, the doings and talks of the artel had dominated the long board table from day to day and year to year and behind the backs of the grown-up, working people, as if in a sheltered warm shed, the home-made

wave-licked bank. His native shore was overgrown with bushes and a mat of grasses and moss, merging with the tundra. The huts of the settlement had sunk into the earth and the graveyard grass had taken their place: warmwood it was. From somewhere the fluff of willow-herb and sticky nettle had come. They had never grown there previously—probably had been brought on a barge and the seeds had remained, to wait until desolation set in. The hut in which Akim had grown and in which his brothers, sisters and mother had lived had gone—in spring the ice had shifted it off its foundations, sawdust spread over the hollowed-out site and rotten beams were strewn about in the willow bushes. The back of the arkel she had been broken, its spine cracked, and it had fallen in, pushing the windows and bursting with broken planks; beyond the collapsed wall of the shed the white Russian stove was encrossed with beams. In Mozglyachikha's shed the plaster had come off to expose the packed splinters beneath the diamond-shaped pieces. Akim's heart contracted, not at the sight of the flapping, grey roofing felt, or of the two pillars of the shed, or of the litter and the tangled grass, but at the stark whiteness of the stove, which, even though abandoned, had not given up. And at the sight of the booth, too—unnoticed, first tucked bashfully away, it stuck out and was now the main feature. Ships took sightings from it, for it could be seen from far. The steamboat whistle stuck up steadfastly above the ruins. The shed, looking like an aerial, the bits of wire whipped in the wind, resembling tangled hair, two stumps from the arkel table could be seen in the sand and two sea-gulls stood on them, their heads crossed. A little higher up a rusty wedge of the cast-iron cauldron cut like a ploughshare into the fronds of grey grass known as *redoded*.

Akim registered all these small details in passing. He did not, he could not, tear his eyes away from the stove, glimmering in the depths of the empty shed like a white screen, and saw pictures of his recent childhood. Here, on this shore, the arkel people had swarmed from spring to winter, Karyaga Wooden Leg had been like a colonel, fair-haired Karyanka had learned songs and fish soup had cooked in the work-team's cauldron, the dangerous talks of the arkel had dominated the long board table from day to day and year to year and behind the backs of the grown working people, as if in a sheltered warm shed, the home-ones

Kayak boys and all the other children had grown up. On the white stove, which was used as a film screen, a thin man had sneaked up to kill the dog White Fang and the mother had been unable to restrain herself. "What are you looking for you bloke?" she had cried, and dashed to defend the dog. But the mother had always been a child, everyone knew that. Gilday, a Nenets, a grown-up man and a hunter, who had come on a visit from Sopochnaya Karga on his reindeer-drawn sledge, hurried himself at the stove-screen with a knife when he saw a bear. And the fishermen at the beginning of the fishing season! Could you forget the mother in a cloudberry-coloured dress and a blue headscarf on her shoulders? Close your eyes and you could hear her drumming her heels on the loose floor-boards, covering her mouth with the scarf, the doves on the scarf fluttering and the word "peace" on it appearing and disappearing, and you didn't have to rack your brains to see what it meant: peace was the affair of the work-team, peace was their mother, remembering her children even when enjoying herself, seeking them out with shining eyes as they lay in a heap on the Russian stove, giving them a wink, and yet—even though they were small, they, too, wanted to tumble down from the stove to stamp and jump and thump the floor-boards, embracing and squeezing and throwing someone into the air—peace and work—a perpetual festival of life!

Akim did not bury his mother in the ground and he could not bury her in his heart. Deep inside he believed that, one day, he would put in to a collective-farm settlement and there, on a rack, would be his mother in the cloudberry-coloured dress with a hospital bundle in her hand, waiting for him. "Akim, Akim, it is you! Why have you been so long coming? I've waited the long for you!" That was why, when Paramon Paramonovich suggested that they put in to the mouth of the Boganida River and visit the settlement—say what you like about it, it was his home and there might be someone whose grave he would like to visit—his lips trembled and he cried shrilly in a squeaky voice:

"No one lived here! No one is buried!" And he ran down the ringing iron steps to the engine-room, where he always hid himself when his spirits became dark.

Paramon Paramonovich did not suggest stopping at Boganida again. Putting his binoculars to his eyes, he gazed for a long time towards where the settlement of Boganida had once been and was no more. The shed had fallen apart and slipped off the undercut

For a long time I plan to had been even more than was by the young lad, the place where the unknown person or persons had was the best with his words, the doctor had had a figure 2, the man a figure 3, the person had got the last of news in the country, the man was a lot of people dragged into a heap and looked by the river of both two pillars of the great table had disappeared. Only a wedge of the east was caution that up from the north behind it earth had been heaped up by the wind and crawling up the hillside, showing even the chest from

"It's true that " Paramon Paramonov's Doctor locally, dragging the headless man to his chest and place reflections, "It's true that when time has it and people in their old grounds they had along on the way off it and they're east where, that's where they take care. And person has been shifted from where he was with some anchor, carried off, there's no reason to expect good dry land."

Once Kasyanka reminded Akim of her existence by writing a letter. The name on the envelope was "Agatha AL Kasyanova". That's strange! She had made a mistake her brother's name. Well, why not—it even had a nice ring how! A-ki-mo-va-na! Akim learned from the letter that Kasyanka had qualified as a painter and was working on a contract near the city of Krasnoyarsk itself.

"Kasyanka's a sensible person, she'll always fall on her Akim thought warmly. "What about my other brothers and sisters? What are they learning to be? What will they do for a living? It would be nice to see them." The wish arose and immediately subsided and Akim did not answer Kasyanka's letter—he wrote letters, there was no time and anyway he needed a and nothing at that time.

But some devil again took it into its head to break up Akim's life, which was running so smoothly. It invented all sorts of buyos—automatic ones. "What's the matter with them in the big cities, haven't they anything better to do than to oppress people and drive them from pillar to post?" Akim thought indignantly. "First they stopped the road being built and Boganida and broke up my family and now they've changed the buyos!"

The *Bedovy* towed barges carrying fishermen to the North



Yenisei, was a quite different world, with different people, who walked differently and ate different food and spoke a different language.

In short, it was a bitter moment for Akim when he saw Paramon Paramonovich Olsufyev and his wife, who had married him for so many years, to the unknown, heroic Virgin Land. He soon received a letter from them, quite a cheerful one with, is true, a certain embarrassment concealed in the words: Paramon Paramonovich wrote that there was a river in Kazakhstan, called the Irtysh. "Of course, it's a far cry from the Yenisei, but you can sail on it, at least as a barge skipper."

"Well, that's fine! That's good!" Akim thought joyfully, understanding that his friend had found himself river work, even if it wasn't very exciting, and that his turbulent spirit had calmed. Akim's heart became quieter, too. By that time he was driving a dump-truck and had become a completely urban person in dress and his habit of running off to the cinema or to dances every day; however, he often went down to the river bank as well. He would sometimes spend an entire white summer night sitting on the grass, his chin resting on his knees, gazing at those sky-blue expanses into which the great Yenisei River retreated. Beyond were many rivers, streams and lakes and further still, the cold ocean and on the way to it, every spring, flowers with tiny mirrors of ice in their crowns rose and lit up the cold midnight earth.

THE WAKE

That summer Akim worked in a geological party on the Yenisei River, a tributary of the Lower Tunguska. His official job was to drive the half-track, but in fact he was repair-man, worked the generator, operated the engine of the pumping station and the winch and kept the engine of the boring-apparatus bits topped up—in short, the list of who he was and what he did was endless. About himself he said modestly: "I haven't flown in an aeroplane yet, pana. I'll have to try. They shay it isn't anything special—you just pull the lever back or push it forward, like a cross-cut thaw..."

kind of depths along new paths. Petrunya cursed for all Evenk to hear, accused Akim of not sticking to his guns and assured him that if he behaved like that he, Akim, would not last long in this troubled world. But for all that he wouldn't abandon his mate, understanding as he did that there on the Yerachimo there were like an advance squad in war-time—they had to stick together.

...Tired from cursing and shouting, the driver and his mate fiddled about with their vehicle, both already peacefully humming an old folk song about a train rushing, rushing along the Turukhansk road, when they unexpectedly heard a lapping, splashing, snorting sound, raised their heads and froze. About 40 metres away, not more, an elk stood in the stream, chewing water weeds, water dripping and the remains of its meal dangling untidily from its large flabby lips, from the hairs sticking out by its jowls and from its entire bent, hump-nosed muzzle.

Akim fell on his belly and crawled towards the camp—he had a gun there, battered and dangerous-looking, but still capable of firing. When the valiant prospectors learned what was up they wanted to dash off in a body after Akim, for they had grown gaunt on concentrated food, canned soup and sprats in tomato sauce and longed for meat—and even more for fun. Akim ordered the band of militants, made up for the most part of recent gaol-birds, to lie flat and hold their breath. Only when it came to Petrunya did Akim's heart soften, he could not refuse him the pleasure of watching how he, his direct superior, so to speak, his friend and mate in the team, would creep up on the beast and kill it.

It must be said that the life of wild animals, in particular elks, had remained completely unchanged in these parts since 1913. The amiable beast could permit itself to loaf about on the Kaluga or the Ryazan highway and gore a little Zaporozhets or any other car or turn up in the villages and cause a disturbance there, to the delight of children and local reporters, who would promptly describe the event, picturing how Pistimeya Agafonovna, a housewife, drove the forest giant from her yard with a broom when it tried to eat her goat's fodder.

In remote areas, like Turukhansk or Evenk region, elks are hunted like rabbits. People try to make use of them as food for themselves or as dog-food or sometimes as a means of buying drink. For this reason elks in the local taiga stick wholly to the ways of earlier times and place far more reliance on their ears.

and the huntsman locks his lips, like a dog, looking into the deer's eyes. Only a tail is lacking, otherwise he would wag it.

"Later, later!" They wave their hands at him earnestly. "You get tanked up now and you'll spend everything!"

The huntsman puts on an offended look and complains tactically that he knows his business through and through and that very important people have come to him, but they don't care for aspersions or undermine his authority. And the huntsman does smartly towards the snowy hills, where the pendulous-eyed does with his herd. Sleepy from the tea and the vodka, and the marksmen take themselves off to the store-house, while others go to their places in the firing line.

And the quiet winter forest groans and murmurs, a jay drops a red spark out of the depths of the fir trees, a half-crane dashes through a glade, magpies chatter, the forest shudders, scattering snow and pine needles, and the sportsmen jerk the bolts of their multi-shot carbines, fitted with optical sights, brace themselves and strain their eyes. Noise and shouts carry from the virgin-pure winter forest, affronted by the savage swearing, as there into the glade, plunging heavily in the snow, leaps a terrible beast, cut off from the herd, hunted down, deafened, and stark with its sweating sides moving, not knowing where to run or what to do, immense, clumsy, defenceless, filled with trust in man after dozens of protected years and now betrayed by man again. Through the black pistons of its nostrils, the elk draws in, from the air—from all sides he is besieged by smells that do not exist among clean-living animals: vodka fumes, petrol, dog, tobacco, onion. The elk freezes, doomed—no beast that smells so repellent, so terrible is incapable of sparing anyone or anything—either the forest, or animals or itself. There is nowhere to hide from him, no mercy to be begged of him, no resistance to be put up, for he has long ceased to fight openly in the forest but strikes only from round a corner, from a safe distance. The feeling of nobility in him has gone and the spirit of friendship and justice towards nature with it. Everything in him has run to fat from his confidence in his intellectual superiority over nature.

Shots! Stupid, feverishly hasty to show off to one another; and finally one, not the most cowardly or base, strikes the great heart of the animal and tears it asunder. The beast collapses onto its bony knees with agonising relief, as if praying to the earth or entreating it, and from this position capsizes heavily and clumsily.

y, kicks up a pile of snow with its finely, sculpturally moulded hoof, in the groove of which wet, yellow moss has stuck, spatters the white meadow red with its whistling breath and, in great pain, saws down to the roots and the autumn leaves and grass.

The sportsmen drive up from the store-house, running over the snow, howling, panting and accomplishing some ritual determined by themselves or satisfying their filthy thirst for blood, discharging their guns point-blank at the prostrate animal.

...However, I have been distracted and that at so important a moment as when a young and very reckless person, grazing his knees and elbows against roots and fallen trunks, his overalls torn and the pocket of his jacket peeled off, was moving towards his goal of obtaining an elk as food for a team of hard-working people.

When they looked out from behind their unshod, stripped "steel horse", its valiant crew discovered that the elk had not waited for them and was not there. It was wandering along the stream, eating grass and would, from all appearances, soon move away to a shallow patch of water which teemed with small fry. The geologists sometimes strolled there and scooped out the vermicelli-like fish with their shirts or towels and boiled them, trying to vary their diet and broaden their "bill of fare", as the menu was mockingly called in the party. Thin weeds grew in the shallow patch, dirty and hairy from the murky water. The elk would quit grazing there and move to the fresh grass or jump on to the bank and go "home"—what did it matter to him, this great, free animal that could go where it liked—and then just try to find him in so wide an area, such tangled, matted taiga, completely choked with trunks, bushes and rubbish.

Akim advanced, jumping from tree to tree. Petrunya followed, but Akim moved noiselessly, fixing in advance where to put his foot by eye, while Petrunya, although he tried to be as quiet as a mouse, to subdue the noise in himself, choke off his breathing and not to crack dry twigs, could not manage it at all. That is always the way when you try your hardest not to cough—you are bound to cough and make a noise. Akim decided to threaten Petrunya with his fist, turned round—and his knees almost gave way beneath him, for his companion was changed out of all recognition: his hair stood on end, his mug, black from fuel oil, was gripped by a consumptive heat, his face flamed with passion and his eyes were on fire, flashing with a merciless and, at the same

... of a moment's time. At once he was ...
... of a moment's time ...
... there was ...
... At the moment ...
... eyes off the ...
... back on his back, ...
... the ...

... of the ... the ...
... intended ...
... to breathe, but ...
... and from beneath it ...
... fully enlarged, ...
... round the ...
... causing the ...
... eyes were weary, ...
... trembled, ...
... the animal ...
... elk sensed something

To be sure of hitting the mark it would be necessary to ...
up at least another ten metres or so on the beast—the rifle was
extremely neglected and knocked-about, for Petrunya, once
when he was drunk, chased people, burning to kill or frighten
someone, but his boss was an old stager, he had hidden the
cartridges and Petrunya banged the rifle butt on a tree trunk to
vent his anger. Of course, no rifle would stand up to that sort of
treatment, not even the one made here, a Tula weapon, knocked
of wood and iron as they say.

Something rustled overhead, bits of earth fell down and sand
too, with greyish patches of moss. "Petrif" ...

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[illegible]

The bear had been waiting for a cry of weakness or pain on the part, a cry in which a mixture of horror and despair in his face he had perceived, and now he advanced and laid his paw on the neck of the other. At this time, the prisoner lay on the ground, propped up and by a movement he was to effect had submitted and formed and seemed to have and under like appeared. It would be the very time to turn and run, but the bear was already within and irresistibly advancing on the man. The fury that flared up in it, the torrents of arterial blood inflamed the bear's mouth with a clotted froth, hissing in reason and tensing its muscles. The tongue lashed out in air and along its back rose again. The bear became more known and mighty as it emitted a confident, paralyzing growl that developed into a terrifying roar of victory.

Alim thrust the gun forward, as if checking himself with a numb, and discovered with amazement, his mind and body grew immense, bristling beast. Nowhere* In forehead, into which pellets are so often sunk by waters, was narrow and skyward bullet would ricochet off if it did not hit it in the centre. The

The talk about the wages reassured all the passengers at once.

The little steamboat with the windlass, christened the *Angara*, was a chain-tug. It had survived a whole era and was the only one of its kind left in the world. Once chain-tugs laboured on the Mississippi, the Zambezi and other great rivers, helping ships through rapids, or rather, pulling them through, quivering and yelping like lapdogs on a leash. The tug, like the learned cat from the Pushkin's fairy-tale, was chained to the rapids. One end of the chain was fastened up river from the rapids, the other down river, underwater. The tug's entire route was two versts long, downstream, and upstream again. However, the monotonous, exhausting work demanded constant courage and patience; but I never heard anybody being sworn at from the tug, though ever so many reasons for doing so presented themselves: now a barge or some other boat would do a clumsy, bad job of tying up, now it would yaw, now something aboard would go wrong during the crossing of the rapids, at the most fearful part. After doing its job, the tug would unhitch the other vessel and leave it to travel under its own steam in the free water where it had never had occasion to be itself, and squeak condescending parent's farewell.

Now there is another chain-tug working on the rapids, the *Yenisei*, offspring of the Krasnoyarsk ship-repair works. It has replaced the old *Angara*. She should have been taken up to Krasnoyarsk and put in the yard of the museum: there is no relic like it left anywhere. But who is to blame for that? There are more pressing things than the *Angara*.

Sitting nearly naked on the

our fare. He did not need to be pressed, drank a glass of vodka, wiped his lips, and very neatly and blissfully ate a ring of cucumber and radish, saying that he had not yet tasted any fresh greens this season. Politely thanking us for our treat, he promised to return our hospitality. "Who ever heard of guests making do with tea at the Kazachin rapids, of all places!"

I tagged after Pavel Yegorovich and soon learned that he had come here in nineteen twenty six from Perm Region. I lived in Perm at the time, and when I told Pavel Yegorovich this, he was taken aback at the information and stared at me with his spruce-green eyes.

"Well, it's no wonder they say it's a small world, isn't it?"

"But you, what winds brought you here?"

"Us?" Pavel Yegorovich glanced over the Kazachin rapids with screwed-up eyes, and I guessed that he did not hear them, not that he did not hear them at all, but that he was used to them, as we get used to a grandfather clock, to a cat's purring—he heard them like one at home here, understanding the voices of the stones, the rumble of the rapids in different kinds of weather: at high water, at low water and in autumn, when the river is covered with greyish-blue embroidery, and grayling that have rolled over the boulders down to the depths lazily pull at the stitches, choosing food from among them, and from time to time a taimen, now rare in these places, thwacks the water with its tail.

"I grew up not far from the Chernushka, by mid-summer the cows had drunk up the stream in our village," said Pavel Yegorovich, waxing loquacious, "but for some reason I was drawn to the water, the big water. I must have some sailor's blood in me!" He broke off and remained silent for a moment, his eyes fixed on the rapids and a channel of the river which bent around a little stony island with a wisp of weather beaten, naked forest on its nape. All around the island lay swaths of washed-away trees, and lots of debris has also been slammed together beyond the rapids, downstream from them, it was burning, spilling out blue grey smoke along the river, on both sides of which mountain ridges and gloomy woods receded into the distance, now in a jumble, now in isolation, now in clumps, now in waves, and baldpates from which the vegetation had been wiped away by storms and fire glinted like needles, but at the foot of the range aspen, birch groves, hawthorn and honeysuckle whirled in merry, motley round-dances and thickets of wild acacia flowed along the stony

slopes. "And I set off on foot around the country," Podporozhnikov continued with a slight sigh. "young, not a bit of strength, and taught to chop and saw while still in my cot—I tramped all the way to the Aniser!"

"That Perm salt-miner has become a real Siberian," I once calls the Yenisei just like we do!"

"Believe it or not, I tramped as far as the Aniser, and I—^{and} something inside me quieted down. 'Here, Pavel,' said my heart, 'here is your haven!' I travelled the Aniser as a star and when I got here I was stunned. 'Oh my goodness, look at that!' Can such a thing really be? I must stop here!" Pavel Porozhnikov did not take his gaze from the rapids, listened to them incessantly, and I divined that his amazement had not come to an end, that it was impossible to get used to such great beauty as this to look one's fill. Only now did I comprehend why old men who near the rapids asked to be carried out into the open before they died. The womenfolk would grumble: "Haven't you gotten sick of the Aniser yet? You've worn yourself out on it! It's ruined your arms and legs."

The dying man must have felt like believing that there, beyond the grave, in the all-hushing darkness, the vision of his native river would continue. Or perhaps he was summoned, impelled toward the river by the need to assure himself that life would continue beyond his life, that the rush of the river, the roar of the rapids would proceed endlessly, and the mountains and the forest would go standing on and on, touching the sky with its top—strength wells strength, and his certitude as to the continuity of life helped him leave for the other world with dignity.

"I've worked as a buoy-keeper all my life. Now there's no need for us."

Automatic buoys bloomed like large crimson rattles in the Kazachin rapids. The little village on the right bank had gone to seed, and the hamlet of Podporozhnaya on the left was also empty. The younger folk have departed from here, but, born to the noise of the rapids, they will hear them inside to their last hour and, as long as their eyes can see, the rapids will go on rolling frothy billows before their gaze in the swirling blue mist of the spray, beating against the stones, humping themselves into mountains of ice when the river freezes over, rumbling and crashing, layering and shattering the earth during the thaw, and a native of Podporozhnaya feels a tightening in the pit of his stomach when

to heat the stone by fire, burnt loads of wood. The stone crack with the heat, they'd back it up, chisel away at it, wedges for many years—each family would fix itself a fish-plate. Now in my lifetime they made use of dynamite, but did not shatter the rock senselessly. True, there are a lot of rocks and they get in the way, but it's no good blowing up too many otherwise the boulders will stick out and there'll be no sailing the river. The rapids regulate the river. Used to regulate it, to tell the truth. Now the hydro-electric station rules everything..."

A couple of dead dace and a crumpled whitebait that had been buffeted until it was black and blue, were rattling around in the third trap.

"Here's how I treated you to fish, dear guests!" Pavel Yegorovich unclenched the hand holding the three pitiful little fishes, gazed at his catch shaking his head, and let them plop into the water. Leaving the traps on the rocks, he silently clambered the steep bank, which the high water had ground fine; whortleberry bushes curled along its edge.

We washed ourselves off in the water. You can't swim here: the largest HEP station in the world holds such a mass of water that it does not warm up, and its temperature is almost constant in winter and summer. Natives of these parts joke mirthlessly if you feel like a swim, head for the Arctic Circle!

According to custom skiffs are dragged up onto the banks; boats big and small are driven into the yards, but, abandoned to all, wrapped in frosty steam, the river sightlessly and voicelessly tosses in a painful doze between the rime-covered banks; there is not a soul on the water, not a soul on the banks, only the waves slash across the massive rocks, the flare of a poacher fishing with a spear flickers uneasily and is immediately swallowed by impenetrable gloom, and somewhere high up, as if in some inferno, another flare or two unexpectedly pierces the dark murk—these are cars feeling their way in the mountains, forced to use their headlights round the clock in times of frost. Loose scabs of sledge-ice float on and on down the exhausted river, circle, and stealthily freeze together in some lull around a bend: the river wants to come to a stop, quiet down, become covered with ice.

The river does not and never will know any peace. Knowing no peace himself, man with savage obstinacy strives to subjugate, to rope in nature. But nature cannot be duped. Fifteen hundred varieties of algae, which are justly dubbed the water plague by the

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According to custom skiffs are dragged up onto the bank; boats big and small are driven into the yards, but, abandoned by all, wrapped in frosty steam, the river sightlessly and voicelessly tosses in a painful doze between the snow-covered banks; there is not a soul on the water, not a soul on the banks, only the waves slash across the massive rocks, the flare of a poacher fishing with a spear flickers uneasily and is immediately swallowed by impenetrable gloom, and somewhere high up, as if in some inferno, another flare or two unexpectedly pierces the dark mark—these are cars feeling their way in the mountains, forced to use their headlights round the clock in times of frost. Loose scabs of sledge-ice float on and on down the exhausted river, circle, and stealthily freeze together in some lull around a bend: the river wants to come to a stop, quiet down, become covered with ice.

The river does not and never will know any peace. Knowing no peace himself, man with savage obstinacy strives to subjugate, to rope in nature. But nature cannot be duped. Fifteen hundred varieties of algae, which are justly dubbed the water plague by the



I remembered the stream in the forest how it used to swell, how it must be capering madly now, over stones, collapsing the crumbly strand, and how, during shouting with its bright mouth, the fly home upon it circling and sailing while the boundless targa it left behind fully rustled under the rain; I imagined how the green cutting leaves and grasses had opened up, the ferns soiled the accursed bugs were trying to hide, without finding cover the biting jets of water, were being washed away by the crumpled and hurled into the river in a stream to feed the fish.

The rain did not pour, it stood like a wall over our town and the distant targa, renewing the world. Near a water-tower, three drunks, among whom I recognised the Evak here were stomping in a puddle, hugging one another and trying dance. The girl's elegant striped dress had become moss-green in the rain and clung to her shapely but already ruined body, her long wet hair stuck to her neck and forehead and got into her mouth. The girl kept spitting it out. She shoved aside the men who got in the way of her dancing, and they at once submissively tumbled into the puddle. Shouting wildly, the wench began to rage and leap about, splashing the water in all directions with her feet shod in foreign sandals. She looked like a shaman, and there was something shamanish in her cries, but upon coming down she made out, "We're—kids! We're—kids of the sixtieth parallel!"

My buddy, my "pana", who had been dragging himself along after me with hanging head, instantly livened up, began to skip on the sidewalk, whistling an accompaniment, throwing out his arms, spreading his fingers and moving his hands, and advanced towards the lass as though he had heard a call understandable only to him.

"Khana abukall!"

"Kharka udyuka-a-all!" responded the lass, her teeth flashing.

"They greeted each other," I guessed and tried to steady my buddy, but he no longer heard anything or heeded anyone but the woman. Continuing to perform various stunts with his arms and legs, clicking his tongue and snapping his fingers, my "pana" seemed to be closing in on his female as if a cock in a mating ritual, spreading out his tail, but the tramp with the missing fingers raised himself slightly from the puddle and weightily uttered: "Git!"

Continuing to snap his fingers and whistle as though he had

and partridge

Sizing up his winter quarters with a glance round it Akim was pleased to notice that the angle at which the hut was the same as it had been in early autumn—that he had not been wasting his time in diving into the depths of the "den" the musket, which had been all set to work the better in driving three supporting baulks into the wall by the be patching up the roof with bark. Human hands—they be preserve and without them even a forest hut falls to pieces.

All the same, something was not right with the quarters, they seemed to have been disturbed: the moss on the roof was trampled down and the moss on the boulders by the knocked off, the stump of a recently chopped-down alder up, the chimney had a black stripe of fresh soot, which meant a fire had been lit not long before; the "garden" had been trampled, the ground by the rapping mouth of the musket stamped down and the currant bush was completely broken; an empty tin can gleamed on the bottom of the End; a be cut fishing-rod leaned against the wall of the hut and a set fishing-line with a commercially-made plastic float dangled. "Hikers!" Akim howled. "They've got this far, the no-go Rozka, frightened, began to bark jerkily at the hut. "Got k devil take them!"

Akim nosed his dug-out into the bank, pulled it in, to cartndge-case and cape out of the prow, glanced at his rifle if it was loaded and waited, inwardly bristling, for a shaggy

working with a plan. He pushed the door open and was
faced by the water, the individual drops of an alkali and was
there, a human face peering out from a dark, shadowy place
emphatically which the man's words had had time to do. It
was a face that he had seen before a week at least. Also, the expression of
the face was old and quite fierce and the eyes had
been covered down to the last eye—no expression, no
hint of what the expression was. (In the next part of
the work was the ground a part of him, a man's head, and
the use as a whole would have been the same as the
particular. "What a sight!" The face turned to him
head "A fellow with a hat? They're dead!"

Alim pushed the door, but it did not give. He reached for
the handle from his shoulder, leaned it against the wall, pushed the
wooden handle with both hands, kicked the door and shoved his
with his shoulder. The door gave a wet squelch and opened
unwillingly. Alim was jerked into the room, where the air and
smell of urine and decay almost knocked him over.

Blinking at the murky, grey-streaked window, to which the
quaint and wood midgets stuck in spots—the window had not
been cleaned, either for lack of time or because this had occurred
to no one—Alim took in the hut: from the window-sill, what
had been hewn by the clumsy axe of an unknown hunter, hung a
dirty, multi-coloured cap, its celluloid peak sticking out like a
duck's bill—a quite inappropriate and pathetic object amid the
poor, rustic surroundings of the hut; on the table was a dirty and
almost squeezed-out tube of mosquito repellent; there were also a
pair of dark glasses in a mother-of-pearl frame on the table, and

Wasted by hunger, drained by fever and violence, she had been something like a paper cracker, nothing solid about her, he thought. With her throat above, tongueless, she gurgled "go, go, go, go, go." Akim fixed his ear to her back and feeling it, ceased to rave and became quite still. He could hear wheezing, rasping and growling beneath her shoulder blades under the flabby, sagging skin. The work of disease is proceeding over the entire tormented, wasted body; the doctor was trying to fell not one or two but several dead trees to the depths of the human organism, and pushing a cart with endless wheels here and there. "Incumbent"—Akim, as if he had heard a death sentence passed on someone close to him and possible to save the lot of the condemned, was tormented by the thought that here he was, still alive and breathing, a step away from someone, but that someone seemed to be beyond reach and moving away all the time.

Akim shut off thoughts like that, overcame his feeling of impotence and perplexity and shook out the contents of the medicine chest, calling himself a smart fellow aloud for having brought on his first trip in the dug-out along with the most valuable cargo. The medicine chest was not large and his friend Kofka had had to prevail on him to take it, but its value lay in the fact that the most important medicines it contained were for colds. As he cleared up the hut, Akim heated water and washed the young woman or girl or whatever she was on the floor, which was strewn with cedar branches. He wound mustard plasters round her, rubbed her with spirit, applied hot compresses and fed her berry syrup, scurrying about sweaty and gasping from the heat, but keeping clearly in mind that the medicines had to be used economically, for there were no hospitals or chemists' shops there. The patient needed careful medical treatment—the spark of life in her was scarcely warm—and he had to look after himself—that was vital. On the first day, he had gone outside sweating and wearing just a shirt, begun to snuffle and had hastened to treat himself, slapping mustard plasters on his back wherever his hand would reach and swallowing a pill. The chill had vanished as if by magic—otherwise he would have been really frightened, for if he perished everyone and everything there would perish with him in the wilderness. He remembered to feed Rozka, too, and ate hot food himself, even though it was on the run and only once a day. Akim had never in his life before looked after himself with such care.

branches, unripe berries, hazel-hen that were tardy in donning "trousers"—that is, growing fluff round their legs—and the listlessly steaming swamps were all signs of a protracted, listless autumn.

In the hut the girl—Akim now definitely knew that she was a girl—lay on the tidied-up plank-bed which was covered with calico. She was stretched out, dressed in men's warm underwear. Her hair had been bleached, but bleached a long time before, and she had become piebald. Her own hair, chestnut in colour, had grown out to more than a quarter of its length. Akim washed her hair and combed all the gnats and midges from it; the insects did not stay in the other, unnatural hair, which streamed out like feather grass below. The girl's eyes, poached by fever, were still darkened in their depths, but the redness of the whites had subsided and at the edge of the pupils or, rather, from behind them blueness had begun to seep out, watery, perhaps, but already touched with warmth. The girl's sharp cheekbones, her parched lips, the shadows under her eyes, her sharply outlined brows and eye-lashes—everything, indeed, seemed separately marked out and overlaid by illness, and was clearly visible on the pale, emaciated face. The long, sharply bent neck with its small, weak tendons aroused inexpressible pity. Supporting the girl's head, Akim fed her from a mug with warm, full-bodied fish soup, saying:

"Drink, drink! Eat. You need to eat a lot. Understand?"

The girl squeezed her lashes together and could not open them for some time—she lacked the strength.

"Go-go!" gurgled in her throat. The girl tried to raise her hand in an effort to point at something. Akim had worked out from her delirium, the objects in the hut and the chopped wood that there had been two people there, the girl and a man. This man had probably been called Goga or Grigory or something else beginning with the letter "g" and the girl wanted either to tell Akim where he had gone or to ask him to find her companion—her husband, perhaps?

Akim pretended not to understand the girl's request, for he should not leave her alone yet. Goga or Grigory had probably lost himself in the taiga and finding him would be a long, baffling and virtually impossible business. Nevertheless, Akim would have to look for him. Sighing like a man condemned, the hunter wiped the girl's lips with a towel and pondered sadly to himself: "F-g b

On the very first day of his stay in the winter quarters he had discovered a home-made lure with a broken hook, cleft in a crack in a log; pieces of fishing line lay white on the water and a rusty factory-made ring. "A fisherman! He went off to fish and was drowned, probably. Where will I find him—and his boat? And what if...?" Akim did not allow himself to think the girl's companion, possibly her husband, had gone away, abandoning her, so black was the thought. Whether this man Goga had drowned, got lost or gone away, he had to be searched for—that was the law of the taiga: to search in the hope that a person had not perished, but needed help and was waiting for assistance. However, first the supplies had to be transferred to the mouth of the Ende. After the glassy morning frost and the bright, short pre-winter quiet, damp, foul weather might suddenly arrive, a blizzard begin and winter take hold.

Akim lit the stove and placed a half-litre thermos of sweet tea by the girl's pillow before setting off down the Ende. He made minor corrections to the boat's course with the light stem oar and surveyed the bank with sharp eyes. Beyond the very first rapid on a small bluff strewn with dark taiga sand and heaped with driftwood among which a squat Siberian cedar without a crow stood masterfully, he noticed the lines of sable tracks and a couple of crows, rushing silently and with an agility at odds with their bulk into the bushes. Akim turned towards the bank. Beside the water, covered with sand to the waist, lay a man, his shoulders gnawed away and his face wrecked. "The water was higher when he drowned," Akim observed and wearily, even somewhat indifferently, reflected further: "There hasn't been any rain, but rivulets in the mountains have frozen up and the snow there is hard, with nothing seeping down."

A bird chattered on the cedar, which was wrapped round with the skirts of its old, impenetrably shaggy fur coat of branches that reached to the ground. This tree was the principal one in the area and, as such, had been struck by lightning, its crown ripped off and its branches flung wide; there were russet-coloured cones in its depths, large, choice cones which had not been knocked off by the wind. There—one ran down, catching dryly on the bark and clicking against the twigs. A crow, grumbling in an elderly fashion and fussing about in the cedar, had disturbed the weathered owl. Somewhere quite close a sable fussed like a cat that was

the place where there had once been a sunburned, slightly arrogant and always unfriendly face. The bulging trouser pockets hid his glance. There, in a wooden box secured by a red rubber-tied in a narrow compartment were hooks, plummets, a piece of whetstone for sharpening blunt hooks, a spare float and a collection of lures coupled together spider-fashion—swinging, swinging, swaying, ribbon and spoon lures—and among them should be a lure, darkened as if from the smoke of a camp-fire, not from an old, silver medal, which Goga, if in fact it was the Gop Akim had known, valued as much as an eye.

It was because of this lure that they had almost shot each other.

Fate had brought them together on a geological expedition. Goga Gertsev was doing his period of practical field work. Straight-tongued, hard-handed and hard-working, the student was haughty and independent beyond his years. At first the workers called him Gosha and tried, following the established custom, to take advantage of him and send him on errands—to go and get things. Gertsev put both himself and the party in their places and preserved his banner of independence. It may be noted that he behaved with perfect self-possession, not only with the workers but also with the leaders, performed his field work confidently and kept his belongings tidy—he never gave his razor, transistor radio, torch, mosquito repellent, sleeping bag or anything else to anyone and never borrowed from anyone, lived on his student stipend and on what he earned, drank almost not at all, shared no recollections of his first love affair and his guilty secrets with anyone, behaved fairly at the common table and did not conceal anything he might shoot. Though still young the variety of things he knew how to do was already remarkably wide—how to move through the taiga, make prospecting pits, swim, shoot and fish—and in everything he tried to depend only on himself. Gertsev was respected in the geological party or, more precisely, tolerated, but he was not loved. Incidentally, love and sundry other feelings that weakened a man were not among his needs.

Gertsev finished his field practice precisely on the day appointed, received his pay and an excellent reference and left for Tomsk to defend his thesis in the faculty of geology.

And then a real miracle! Five years later, on the Sym River, in some god-forsaken corner of the taiga, Kolya and Akim were

After tarring it over the embers, which made it smooth, pale and seemingly covered with lacquer, he tested the axe by experimentally helping Kolya and Akim build their hut, casually teasing, jokingly or in earnest—you never knew with Gertsev—have to square up with you. I don't like being in anyone's debt.

Akim spat and turned away, unable to understand why this person always thought too much of himself, was never able to behave naturally with people. The next day they had a drink in honour of the hut's completion and Kolya promised to take Gertsev in the boat, adding jerkily: "You can work off the petrol afterwards!" "All right," agreed the guest unthinkingly. "The dung has to be cleared out of the cow-shed—it's up to the ceiling." "Mission understood," Gertsev agreed again. Akim gave a baffled grunt, shook his head and gulped too much spirituous irritation. When the drink had gone to his head he badgered Gertsev with the question: "What sort of a perthon are you?" "Learn to clean your teeth first before you pester people with your questions!" said Gertsev, brushing him off, and hissed seathingly separating his words: "I-am-a-free-man! Does that suit you?" "I'm free, too." "Y-o-u?! Ha, ha, ha! That's rich! You were and always will be an adopted son, get it?" "Got it!" Akim suddenly flew into a fury and shouted: "Kolya! Get rid of him! I can't answer for myself! I'll shoot him! I'll drown the swine or do something!" "Bastard!" Gertsev paled his rucksack on to his back and walked off into the night with the white axe-handle pushed into a sheath on his right side.

During the day they overtook Gertsev. Kolya nosed the boat into the bank and invited the wanderer to climb in with a jerk of his head. Gertsev's face twisted disdainfully and he shoved the boat away with his foot before scrambling up a gully to a steep clay slope, clutching at fallen trees and thorny bushes. On the slope he paused, took a small-bore rifle from his shoulder and holding his arm outstretched, as if firing a pistol, downed a bird which had been shrieking at the top of a fir tree some hundred metres or more away.

"What a shot!" Kolya marvelled.

His companion remained silent, sitting by the motor, which steamed in the rain, and snuffing.

"Well, do we go on or do we stay here, admiring the show?" he burst out.

Gertsev soon showed up in Choosh. Akim met him, har-



wooden barrier, which looked like a curtain, put it to be
 woman and aspen twigs in a half-line jar, drew out her arms
 and quietly let drop "Yes", "No" and "Not at all"—and re-
 herself tighter in a warm woollen scarf, taking except the
 picture magazines and in the evenings, from a cradle lid
 anything in the studying English and eagerly reading and
 reading one and the same novel—*Doctor Faustus*.

Her predilection for this solid foreign book frightened Gav-
 rilovna. Ah, even Faust seemed an ill-omened figure to Gavri-
 lovna. And now it was Faust! What passions, "from abroad"! Of
 course, with maternal concern, Gavrilovna would approach Ly-
 udochka with advice: "You should read something else, Ly-
 udochka, shake yourself out of it, amuse yourself, go to dance
 bit, drink fresh milk. If you like, I'll bring some straight from
 library, free."

Once Gavrilovna found the new arrival in the library. He was
 leaning on the barrier and chatting to Lyudochka with an
 overwhelming amiability that Gavrilovna did not want to break
 the interlocutors away and backed into the reading-room, where
 open the door with her posterior.

Gertsev invited Lyudochka to his pristine chamber, gave her
 tea, adding a spoonful of brandy for the bouquet, began a conver-
 sation and warmed the girl's spirits, informing her, however, that
 he had a wife and daughter in Novosibirsk; so she should not try
 to build anything up for the future, but he would guarantee that
 she would not have to buy an air-ticket to Yeniseisk again.

"You're a heel too," Lyudochka said softly, but she stayed the
 night: it was very warm and cosy at Gertsev's and it was inter-
 esting to listen to him. The ideas he expressed were not new and
 not his own, but he expounded them with such conviction and
 such irresistible fire.

While still a child Goga, having seen enough fuss and disorder
 in his parents' life "in art",—art!, he scoffed—they were camp-
 followers of an opera company—set himself the goal of learning
 everything that was necessary for a life independent of other
 people and of tempering his body and spirit in order later to go
 where he wanted, do what came into his mind, to take account
 only of himself and to listen only to himself.

After graduating from university and "doing his time", he
 immediately ceased to work as a geologist and wandered at will,
 doing what he pleased, limiting his needs to the minimum but

the cross, watchfully guarding the dead man, to get on existing in the winter quarters. "Why didn't you live alone? Why did you share with your citizens, hunting people? You wanted to be a man separate from other people? To make common pit, in seething porridge, and not get bored? It would be a neat trick! No, you can taste and turn as much as I like, but you'll go soft and be served up on a plate all the same! You want to live by yourself, invent yourself a sky, from a sky, to another land, live there alone by yourself and deliver up girls."

Akim violently ripped open the rusted zip, took the key out of the dead man's pocket, lingered a moment and moved a rubber band. The lure, blackened, with a springy bad bar soldered to it, seemed to lie separately from the other hook rings, fastenings and lures, which were edged with rust deep ridges and holes. Akim balanced this solid, smoothly curved bar in his palm, then squeezed it so that the hook cut into the skin of his hand—a lure for a big fish, a salmon.

Kiryaga Wooden Leg, who had moved from Boganda to Choosh, could no longer approach his former status. He worked as a stoker at an office and was also a part-time watchman at the fishing co-operative's shop, for which he was paid one-and-a-half salaries. But even one-and-a-half was not enough. There were more than enough drinking companions in Choosh and Kiryaga Wooden Leg got blind drunk with them; only his wooden leg and his medal "For Valour" with its frayed ribbon, which was still of the old type, remained to him. Kiryaga Wooden Leg asked Akim to make a reliable fastening for it, because the medal "For Valour" and the wooden leg were the only things that still enabled him to stand apart from the other wandering off-road, boast about his feats of bravery and weep for the front-line sapper and the "very important perthon" he had been in Boganda.

Akim was working as a driver at the fishing co-operative there and looked in once on Kiryaga Wooden Leg at his watchman's job. He found him sniffing with his button nose, the tears rolling down his high cheek-bones and getting lost in his sparse, child's fluffy whiskers: he had felt for his medal and it was not there on his wadded jacket.

"You drank it away?"

Kiryaga Wooden Leg dissolved into a fresh flood of tears and bawled that Akim kill him, "right now, like a dog".

"What did you get for it?"

"A bottle..."

"Well, damn your ugly mug!" Akim thrust his fist under the nose of Kiryaga Wooden Leg. "I should give you . . . but you're old..." And he dashed off to the workshop at the saw-mill. He knew beyond doubt who would be capable of taking a beggar's trick. Even in the settlement of Choosh, which had more than enough scum of all kinds, there was only one person who could receive a war invalid and make an exchange for his last medal.

"Where's Kiryaga's medal? Give it to me!" Akim burst into the workshop, throwing himself fiercely at Gertsev.

Goga opened his desk, took out an elegant lure worked with silver, held it by the hook with two fingers and twirled it in front of Akim's face like a conjuror.

"Better than factory-made, isn't it?"

"You really are a swine!" Akim shook his head. "The old women call Kiryaga holy, God's man. And that's what he is! God will punish you!"

"I don't give a damn for old women or that dirty cripple! I'm my own god! And I'll punish you—for insulting me!"

"Come on, then, come on!" Akim was aware of a cold feeling in the pit of his stomach, like satisfaction long-awaited. "Come on, come on!" Akim was preventing himself from flying at Gertsev with great difficulty.

Goga ran his eyes over him.

"I'll strangle you, you know!"

"We'll soon see who strangles who..."

"To get into jail because of a slob like you..."

Gertsev did not finish his sentence, but flew with an odd and far from athletic clumsiness over the bench, knocking plates and the box of lures from the table. He crashed to the floor, but did not throw himself on Akim in response—unexpectedly, he began feeling about on the floor, collecting together the hooks, rings and fastenings in a manner suggesting that nothing had happened or that, if it had, it had nothing to do with him.

"Satisfied?" he said at last, fixing his gaze on the dishevelled Akim.

"Well, why don't you hit back?" It was only now that Akim realised that this well-cared-for, totally-built young man had

never been beaten by anyone, but had to fight seven to one, a
 some young people in a group, on a spree and seeking to
 passions do now "Afraid, are you? Afraid, eh?"

Gertsev wiped his mouth and declared, after overcoming his
 confusion, that a tough house was only for freaks and he would
 not descend to scuffling; however, if Akim wanted to do
 following the noble old custom, Gertsev was willing. Akim knew
 that since his youth Goga had shot in rifle ranges and sports halls
 while as for him, it was no secret what sort of a marksman he
 was—a cartridge was worth more than gold and from his earliest
 years he had had to conserve supplies and shoot when he was
 virtually standing over a bird. So Gertsev's move was a good
 one, but too obvious and impudent, not the sort of thing that was
 done in the taiga, where openness and honesty are still alive in a
 fight or in misfortune. Cooler now, but not without an element of
 gloating, Akim set his conditions:

"If it's to be shooting, so be it! Let our paths cross in the night
 and no one will be any the wiser... Why should I be put in jail
 because of garbage like you!..."

"You won't be in jail, you'll be under the ground."

"Well, we'll see. I may look as if I'm built like a shack, but
 you'll have a job pushing me over!" The saying of the Bogunids
 fishery foreman had come back at just the right moment and
 Akim, pleased with himself, almost transfixed the whipped "free
 man" to the wall.

Now their paths had crossed, had met at last. "My own
 god", sucked dry by loach and gnawed by sable, sprawled,
 defeated by death which, unlike life, does not permit itself to be
 fooled or made an entertainment. All have one death, it is the
 same for everyone and no one can escape it. And while it lays in
 wait for you in an unknown place, with inevitable suffering in
 store, and while you are afraid of it, you are no hero and no god,
 just an actor from a defunct theatre, amusing yourself and an
 audience of gaping females, like the librarian Lyudochka or the
 poor little creature in the hut.

Before burying Gertsev and covering him with rocks, Akim
 felt the back of the dead man's head. It was just as he had thought—
 this cautious, seemingly omniscient man had made a
 blunder—the rocks in the rapids were coated with slippery moss
 and, even with a good tread on the soles of one's boots, jumping
 on them would require care. Gertsev's boots were battered, the

small bone rifle and shuffling his shoulders without work out in a funny way in life.

When Akim stepped across the threshold another detached itself from the window.

"Goga!" Elya spoke as with a swollen tongue, demanding not asking.

"Well, you're a quick one, you are!" Akim frowned at the world coming to! Now she's beginning to demand!

Not answering the girl, the hunter lit the stove, put soup on it to heat, gave Revka boiled fish entrails to eat at the table.

A questioning gaze followed him unwinkingly, and the light of the fire dancing in the stove struck the wall, reaching into the corner, her eyes gleamed phosphorescently, as in a man's.

"I-g-h it! What a nightmare! Drowned man's hair!" Immediately he was amazed by the stupidity of the proverb! His hands and clothes smelt strongly of the drowned man. He washed his hands, first with kerosene, then with water and scented so, but a smell like that clings—you can't tear it off. "Slob!" Akim recalled the word, not spoken but simply hammered home by thinker Gertsev.

"Well, how have you been getting along here, all alone?" Akim inquired, waiting until dusk fell and the patch of snow beyond the woods, like a burn smeared with iodine and swabbed round the edges, was completely extinguished. A biting morning frost was promised by the sunset, which would hurry the last fish on its way and move from the upper reaches the last schools of fish, fearing to be frozen in the ice through to the bottom; at that moment ice forming along the banks and floating mush would cut off the baggage stored at the mouth of the Ende. Without the baggage, without the stores, they would perish. Everything at the camp had been calculated in terms of one person—who was or sick. "Well, how have you been spending the bitter winter alone?"

"Elya!" whispered from the corner.

"Elya!" rejoined Akim. "I know." And continuing mentally to live in his own worries, he repeated: "Elya! Good, good!" Then he started, leaped up and fumbled for her in the corner. "You got up! You've started to speak! That's good! That's fine!" And he went on to explain, as if to a deaf-mute: "I have to go

"Cargo! Cargo, do you get it, cargo! It has to be moved quickly, we have to build up stores. Stock up meat and fish. "

"Goga!" the girl interrupted him.

Akim broke off, shifting about on the plank-bed.

"Goga's gone missing," he said gloomily "He's gone away. Got lost..."

"Goga ... couldn't..." The girl disagreed, collecting her words into a sentence as if by touch.

"He could, my dear, he could! The taiga has brought better men than him down," Akim argued, marvelling: "Well, he really pulled the wool over her eyes! She believes in him, eh?"

"Perhaps he twisted his foot or stumbled on a bear? Fell off a cliff or got into a gully ... that's what the taiga's like!"

Elya sobbed, pressing herself further into the corner. The gaps between the logs there were musty and damp. Akim silently pulled her out, put her down on the bed, covered her up and stroked her soft hair. The fine skin on the crown, childishly depressed was warm and he again became sorry for the helpless girl, sorry to the point of howling.

"Elya, listen to me."

"Ye-es."

"I am a professional hunter. These are my winter quarters. You can tell me later how you got here. Right now, listen to what I tell you."

Separating his words, as if reading a dictation at school, Akim told her everything about himself and about what they had to do in order not to kick the bucket, she had to get well as quickly as possible and be patient—he would puzzle out everything else himself, get things done and they wouldn't go under.

"After all, you want to live, don't you?"

"W-a-n-t!"

"Dead right! So, don't cry and don't be afraid of me. You'll be alone, but don't be afraid of that either. I'll be with you all the time. Only there's the baggage..."

He tried insistently to persuade her, using every argument he could think of. Elya became tense as she listened, but understood only that now the sole human being near her was also going away somewhere. She dug her sharp fingers into him, her whole body shaking, sobbing, her tears gleaming in the darkness.

"Well, well, f-e-h! What shall we do, then? You?"

She actually fell asleep or, rather,

with

him down flat on his back to sleep. Akim covered his eyes with his palms, murmured something to himself in the half-frozen and yellowed depths out of the boat, then stopped crying, needed for a moment to rest, drank, stretched. Elya was painful and hunched with him when he was sleeping. Akim did not expect the day to last.

"Good night," he murmured softly, then went to sleep.

In a few days, already when he awoke, Akim began to huddle up in the boat, drawing himself into a ball and wearing the skin of his palms as gloves with the pole of his bed. Without the strength to eat, take his boots off or crawl or to sleep, he tried his eyes, suffered and wept, on his trying to remember something, to grasp something, but his head was no longer capable of anything and he hid on cedar branches covering the floor and slept for almost twenty hours.

Akim was wakened by a light but persistent knock. The boat opened his eyes and saw the girl sitting on the planked fir flannelette blanket he took everywhere because it was so easy to pack thrown over her shoulder. Flames winked in the snow; it was unusually clear, even light poured through the window; it made Elya's face shine, admittedly in a way, paper white, but nevertheless with the throb of life.

"Snow!"

Akim leaped up and bare-headed, wearing only his shirt, dashed out of the door and ran to the stream, biting his lips and they hurt, to keep himself from swearing vilely. "Crushed! The boat's crushed!"

The boat was locked into murky ice that was curving like a sheet of tin along the bank, weighed down by a grey porridge of water and ice. Akim sat on the prow of the boat, robbed of strength, and stroked its rough aspen-wood cheek, as if it was the neck of a horse covered with short, springy hair. Never, he promised himself, never again would he trust to chance, especially in the taiga—much, in fact, had depended on this fragile bark, fragile in all seriousness and not just in the proverb.

When he went back to the hut he cheerfully praised Elya, called her a great girl and also added that things would come

right, it was impossible that they shouldn't come right.

"Is Goga lost?" Elya looked directly at him. "Or has he abandoned me?"

"Aha, so you doubted! That means you're not a complete rooster!" Jokingly Akim parried her questions, saying that Goga was not the same sort as Tom the piper's son, over the hills and far away. Goga would not abandon her. He quickly found something requiring his attention and slipped outside where he began to whack the wall with an axe—long ago a drunken hunter, a run-away prisoner or a hiker had left a filthy inscription on a log. As he hewed off the indecent words, Akim continued to be tormented by various concerns and questions. One question stuck to him like a plaster he could not tear off. "Where? How? When did Gertsev charm this pretty little thing?"

They came together, Elya, the girl from Moscow, and Georgy Gertsev, the free man, quickly and amazingly simply. The twelve minutes of a river-boat stop at a jetty was enough for them to meet and join their fates.

The river-boat pushed its metal side up to the landing-stage at Choukh, the usual commands that accompany docking were heard, a sailor was on duty in the bows and on the upper deck a knot of passengers was glued to the yellow ship's rail. Gertsev spat into the water from the landing-stage as he waited for the boat, in the buffet of which he intended to buy good tea—in the settlement every drop was consumed by the tipplers of strong tea. In fact, it was more from boredom that Gertsev was hanging around on the landing-stage with other inhabitants of Choukh. Somehow he could not pack himself up and go into the taya—some kind of indecision was holding him to a familiar place. He was still working at the saw-mill, although he was fed up with the saw-mill and the settlement of Choukh and the life on Lyudishka. Despite all his precautions, she had contrived to "get caught" and was crying behind the book shelves and falling in faints in front of readers, hoping by these demonstrations to touch Gertsev's heart—he would sympathise and not abandon her in such a state.

A fellow still quite young but already fat, leaned against the rail on the middle deck of the river-boat, gazing into the distance at the Choukh stacks and both houses. The young fellow's eyes, Gertsev's eyes,

wearied by inactivity, found nothing in Goga that excited his
toss and shifted to the cigarette which the young fellow is
smoking without enjoyment, as if performing a duty and that
without finishing, he threw, or rather did not throw or even let
but let drop by relaxing his fingers, duly following it with his eye
as it fell, sparking and spinning, over the side.

Near the young fellow stood a bored girl, dressed in a blue
two-colored sweater in the style of a plover costume over orange
satin trousers. These, in their turn, terminated in gold-colored
slippers just like those once presented to Cinderella by the prince
but this one, Goga Gertsev decided, had bought them with her
currency vouchers obtained from speculators. On her back
which was as restless as a sniffing animal, were the words "he"
on one side of her sweater in blue on white and "you wait" on
the other in white on blue. An exclamation mark as large as a
traffic-policeman's haton completed this cartoon-film catch-
word.

The girl was bored, too, and, like the young fellow, was
smoking a cigarette, but her boredom was active; she gulped
down the smoke greedily and constantly shifted her gold slipper
from side to side, as if hurrying somewhere—Bob Dylan, yelling
from the loudspeaker, or someone else did not leave her in peace,
winding her up or, on the contrary, unwinding her. And now
came an unexpected turn: Goga felt that everything in him was
beginning to unwind, that he, too, wanted to board the bus
go to the girl, listen to the voice of Bob Dylan and guess boldly
whether the call imprinted on the independently jutting bosom
was directed to him, Goga Gertsev, personally or to the whole
world. "There are fatal passions everywhere and no salvation
from fate!" Gertsev sighed submissively and noticed another girl
in a finely-striped sailor's vest that bulged at the bosom, her
bleached hair gathered into a pony tail at the neck and cut short
in a fringe on her forehead, bright-lipped, big-eyed and as fresh as
a meadow strawberry. The quick eye of a hunter and wanderer
instantly picked out this passenger, separating her from the
remaining mass.

"Hey, snubnose! Where are you going, what are you looking
for?"

Her eyes still shining and smiling at something, the girl replied
gaily:


"My fate!"

"Perhaps we could look together?" Gertsev possessed the ability of blind men or the paralytically drunk not to be embarrassed by people, not to see them, to separate off what he was doing or intended to do from them when necessary. He therefore paid not the slightest attention to the ironic grins and curious glances of the passengers and the residents of Choosh, demanding the landing stage. While still among the crowd, he talked to the girl as if they were alone. And—the maraculous happened! The girl, feeling that something was wrong, tensed inwardly, stopped smiling and tried to resist the enchantment, sensing that she was weakening under the pressure of some force—was it hypnotic? Not for nothing had a former university friend once said to Gertsev "What sort of a person are you? You talk to a girl for half an hour and she doesn't even notice that for twenty nine minutes you've been undressing her!"

"Come down!" Gertsev pointed at his feet, twisting his hand with the elegant gesture of a conductor.

The girl shivered and stepped back from the rail, fumbling at her throat and trying to draw her clothes more tightly round her, but all she had on was her sweet little circus vest with a chaste white border and a chaste appliqué white seagull on her chaste pointed bosom, the round berms of her nipples showing under the thin, alluringly clinging fabric. Clean, helplessly weak nails with almost transparent nail varnish gathered up a handful of the vest's blue fabric in order to cover or rather to hide a bosom that had proved to be so dangerously exposed.

"Got you!" Goga clicked his tongue and, without waiting for the gangway to be lowered, leaped over the edge of the landing-stage on to the *Composer Kalinnikov*.

As he stood in a queue at the buffet, he looked absently at a lithograph of the person whose name this graceful white ship bore. A person with large ears and a provincial appearance, his hair cut short; had not his gaze been inspired, illuminated by a spark from within, and directed, as it were, from soul to soul, had he not been wearing a bow-tie, the infallible attribute of those who serve the muses, and had it not been for his face, the childish trustingness of which was a talent in itself, a mystery seemingly revealed to all but not understood even by the creator himself, a mystery tormenting him with disquiet and tending his imagination, hearing and heart with passions invisible to the world, this big-eared person would have been taken for an  clerk.

curious with the hopefulness of a poet, but was not a poet.

Maria was playing in the house again. The second son of Kalinnikov, a lawyer in the German army, was performing.

"The composer's father was a devoted price payer of alcohol drink. Later he was an assistant district physician. Ilyash." As he listened to the expansion, and quite without music, Gertsey read the biography of Vasil. Sergeyevich. It was and it seemed to him that he was walking over a desert already touched by the mists of autumn, and in the distance yellow birch stood stonylike, the only one on the horizon. "Under the conditions of the old, expansive man is forced to make his way to the artistic heights at the cost of enormous deprivation and struggle and ultimately overcame strength." Later everything was just as it should be in our own of Russia: ecstasy and tears during the performance of his symphony, the hat passed round to collect money for treatment of the composer, mortally ill with consumption—but the time for cure was already past. "Oh, Christ!" Gertsey sighed and pulled up his ears; but that was not Kalinnikov who was being performed, was it? Gneg, perhaps? It sounded like the introduction to his only piano concerto—allegro-molto-moderato or how did it go? Tr-r-ram-pam! Ta-ra-ra-rum-pam! "Y-e-s, I've lived to see the day! I've confused a Norwegian with a Russian! It's all working out just as my dear parents predicted..."

His parents, the children of old-fashioned village teachers besotted with poetry and music, met at music school and by the time they entered the conservatory were already sharing their misfortunes as husband and wife—without noticing, they overposed a child to minuets and fugues. Because of the child his mother was, in fact, unable to "finish off" the conservatory; his father, by the time he eventually graduated and received a post in the orchestra of an opera house, became a neurasthenic. The boy grew up to a melody of Gluck, falling asleep and waking up with it. At about the age of ten he rolled his eyes epileptically at the sound of his father's flute, switched off record-players and radios, never went to a concert and still less to the opera and, to spite his mother, muddled himself on waste land with a football. He began to earn his own money early. His parents dreamed of entering him in a liberal-arts college, but after completing school he de-

ared that if he was not allowed to enter the geology faculty he could either leave home or hang himself.

His small, hysterical mama had died early. His papa, according to rumour, had re-married, but whether this was, in fact, the case, Georgy was not sure—he corresponded with no one, his father excluded.

"Tr-r-ram-pam! Tara-ra-ram-pam! What is it really, then? Tring or Kalunnikov?"

For some reason he recalled the young fellow and the girl he had just seen on the river-boat. Dropping his cigarette and not knowing what else to do, the young fellow had fixed his eyes on the settlement and said something to the girl with a grin. The girl had ceased fidgeting and shuffling her feet and also looked closely from under lids thickly covered with blue eye-shadow—it was not just a gaze, but something inflamed, already unfocussed by knowing all, by satiation with available pleasures. The girl looked at the earth, at the settlement, at the people crowding the bank, at the side of the landing-stage and half pitied them, half resented being shown such people, who held no interest for her. The deliberate, theatrical affectation in this ultra-modern girl was alien to her nature and deforming it, her scorn for everything, even her recklessness were pathetic.

Actors had come out of the theatre on to the street! They had come out in make-up, wigs and flashy clothes, arousing nothing in their audiences but a lazy obeisance to fashion.

The theatre, conversely, its props passed into common use, has shaken off the dust of centuries and begun to live a natural life. Make-up has almost disappeared, petrified conventions are being stripped away, curtains are being removed, scenery taken away and now the prince of Denmark sings modern tunes to a guitar, Othello wears white gloves to strangle Desdemona, workers of a giant excavator walk about the auditorium in boots and shout "Show-offs!" at the stage during a snivelling account of the sufferings experienced by a present-day Magdalene who works as a cashier in a village shop.

Which are the audience? Which are the actors? Where is life? Where is theatre? What is truth? What is falsity? Everything has been mixed up, everything lies at the crossroads of playing at life and life itself. Thus talker with the girl and he, Gertsev, were, to tell the truth, straddling, with one foot in the theatre, among the

burst of a flower in a field and a motherly glimmer in the eyes of a woman who accepted her lot and the destiny that was hers. "There were looking for you, were they?"

"I'm looking for my father," the girl declared, proud to be better.

"Your father?" Gertsev asked, surprised because he did not believe the girl, seeming to reach for her in his warm, deep breath. "What's happened, has he run away from you, has he?"

"He's working," the girl said, determinedly turning past, and passed a well-known epidemiologist. "His expedition is in the Lower Tenguks."

"It was there last year!" Gertsev looked anxiously at his watch. Ten minutes remained before the departure of the *Kalashnik*. "I'll explain as we walk! Where's your cabin?"

When the river-boat *Comrade Kalashnik* came off from the Chuvash jetty the girl, whose name was Elya, her legs crossed, wearing brand-new multi-coloured sneakers and with an expression of light-heartedness on her face, stood on the landing-stage beside a check, zippered suitcase and a leather bag, from which the handle of a tennis racket protruded. Elya waved to someone on the boat, shrugged her shoulders and spread her hands, fastening and unfastening her burgundy-coloured nylon jacket. An athletic-looking young man rushed up, picked her up and pulled her off, saying that only he knew where her "daddy's" expedition was and that only he could bring father and daughter together.

Meanwhile the river-boat was turning leisurely, making the Yenisei smaller. Then, after the craft had pointed its narrow,

streamlined bows at the wide-open northern distances, its engines beat more loudly, a puff of curling smoke appeared over the funnel, the water boiled fiercely behind the stern and was cast away in a twisted hummock, moving off towards the sharply curved expanse of the river, where two separate strips of land rocked and winked in the sun-beams.

The boat soon hung between the quivering spits of land, as if going no further and not rocking but dissolving from below like a white cube of sugar, descending into the water until at last it melted away.

Goga was in no hurry to leave Choosh and assured the girl that it was impossible to go into the taiga because of the muges and mosquitoes. They lived for some two weeks in the gleaming white workshop, read books, talked and could not get their fill of talking, wandered about the outskirts during the white nights holding hands, read poetry, sang songs and caught fish in baskets. However, the librarian Lyudochka came back from "leave" and scared off the pair. Running her nervous, beautiful hands over her udes, drained, bluish like a lungwort, Lyudochka stood with her back against the door-jamb of the workshop. She hid her desolation behind an air of scorn and pursed her parched lips as she surveyed the girl sprawled on the bed, still in street clothes, reading a book, before giving a tired, ironic grin and grunting: "Another romantic reader's arrived!" She stood for a moment longer, then, without saying anything more, departed, leaving the guest perplexed and confused.

Gentsev refused to give an intelligible answer to all Elya's persistent questions, instead grimacing and saying "A-h, it's not worth talking about—she's just a slob!". All the same, he could not withstand Elya's onslaught and did speak more openly: "She came around here, pushed herself on me and began to stick her nose in everywhere, even in my diaries. Just like a woman!"

A day later Goga and Elya were sailing in a powerful, spick and span mer-boat, the *Professor Bliznyak*, into the bright land where the summer sun never sets. They had a two-berth cabin, dined in the restaurant, danced on deck in the evenings and were in no hurry to get anywhere. The boat earned them to Dudinka and turned round. They left it at Igarka—Elya had read about this town in the newspapers and wanted to see it; and she liked

let—the fish had not yet come down stream. He would move away from the hut for berries and nuts and a stream food. But Elya would not let him go and he was deceiving her: a landing area had to be prepared. In two or three days the hunter would come with his rifle, they would call for a helicopter and fly away to the rest of an eye. Her senses sharpened by illness, she detected he wept quietly. Once, however, she broke down, choked and lashing him about the face but was quickly exhausted, he passed and she embraced his neck fearfully, kept to where she had struck him.

This was a week or, at most, a week and a half before the arrival of the hunter, as Goga's diary, which he kept regarding his circumstances, later showed. Gertsev was, after all, a capable man of the taiga and was able to calm himself and his companion, assuring her that her illness was a complaint, bronchitis, not dangerous and curable even in the taiga. Herbs, berries and poultices improved the sick girl's condition; to please her companion, she said that she even liked to be in the forest hut. You could only read about that in novels here it was all real and graphic, so to speak. When she told people in Moscow about it, they wouldn't believe her.

Nature, too, was kind to them, sending quiet, golden days numbing, annihilatingly foul weather. One would not believe that this earth, these woods had just been blanketed in impenetrable driving snow and had been so wet and dank that the air had seemed to thicken, that cold which did not melt but lay in the chest. Scattering roasted nuts from a pot on the table, placing a thermos of tea to hand, Gertsev took his reel and small-bore rifle, tweaked Elya's cap and said cheerfully, casually before leaving:

"Well, that's it, snubnose! The salmon are running! You have time to peck the nuts before I bring back the most delectable river monster. We'll cook it and eat it and you'll immediately become plump and rosy. It's flying weather and there'll soon be a plane or a bird or Superman!" Goga kissed her finger-tips, jokingly made the sign of the cross over her; she remembered shivering. "Why did he do that? It was wrong."

She waited patiently for him until evening. She waited through the night. She waited another day and night. Then she was engulfed by sleep. Later, sleep passed into a kind of slow oblivion.

d she seemed to move away from herself and sink into unconsciousness.

There was no cold or pain or suffering, there was nothing.

Elya would have slept an eternal sleep in the permafrost on the bank of the deserted, remote Ende had Akim not had a true friend, one tested by many misfortunes. It was he, Kolya, tormented by illness, who had said to Akim in parting: "Since you're a stubborn blockhead with no brains at all and you'll rot in the targa, stock up with medicines and not just aspirin .." And he filled the medicine chest himself, in which, to Akim's surprise, there was even a syringe with a small sterilizer, several boxes containing ampules of camphor and glucose and phials of penicillin, as well as a cellophane bag full of pills and powders.

"What's the matter with you? Do you think I'm going into the targa to be ill? I'm going to hunt!" "You can leave it in the hut, if you don't come to grief, you idiot! It's the lightest load and the most valuable in the targa..." "All right, all right, only shove those more pain-killers in there."

Akim's bad, Northerner's teeth often ached and he knew only one medicine—pain-killers—which he consumed like sweets. He had been seriously ill only once, not counting the scurvy he had contracted while still a child. During the second or third autumn of his service under Paramon Paramonovich their ship was delayed in the lower reaches of the river. They hurried to reach the quiet Igarka channel for the winter lay-off, but were outpaced by the freezing cold and the ice round the *Bedovy* had to be chipped away with crow-bars. Akim fell from the steps and bobbed up and down in the icy mush, not abandoning the crow-bar—a valuable piece of iron when the *Bedovy* was in that situation. He was still clutched the crow-bar when he was pulled out of the water. At the Igarka hospital he heard in the distance, through a blanket of fever: "Camphor! Camphor! Respiration!"

Akim had never experienced anything so terrifying, so paralyzing, as when he gave Elya the first camphor injection.

Akim's thinking and memory were accurate. He did everything as it was done in hospital, spreading cheese-cloth on the table, boiling the hyperdermic needle on the stove, carefully cutting off the protruding tip of the ampule with a tiny round piece of board, drawing all the liquid out of it to the

... voice of Akim, the point stretched out ^{and} challengingly, beside it the girl, a sick person, lay on the bed, face down, just as he had turned her over. Her back strained, indeed, it could not be called breathing at all, hissing, a noise, frequent light sobs, when a person's is not sufficient for fever and groans, when he is no longer on a log-fire, but is in the last stages of melting on glow. Akim approached the sick girl, lifted her shirt, thorough the waxy, shining skin under her shoulder-blade, which raised like a wing, brought the needle close and ^{then} jerked it away in fright when he saw how the small, helpless squirmed, transfixed by the needle, which had somehow become as thick as a finger.

After the third or fourth attempt, Akim decided to try hyperdermic needle again—there might be germs ... get round and he had been pawing the delicate instrument with his hands of his, clumsy and, no matter how much you washed covered in callouses and cuts...

Only when morning came and the sky whitened outside the window and the sick girl ceased even to sob and became quite still did he cross himself, holding his breath, as if about to jump into water, draw back the feeble, crumpled skin on the girl's back, and, sewing up his eyes, thrust the needle into what seemed to him emptiness. However, when he opened his eyes he saw that the sickly sting of the needle had gone under the skin and the girl had not even shuddered, she seemed to have relaxed and reached out when she sensed the needle. He still had enough strength left to eject the liquid from the syringe, hold a wad of cotton-wool soaked in spirit on the tiny, slightly bloody spot where the needle had entered and place the syringe carefully on the table. After that he leaped out of the hut, pulled his shirt out of his trousers and shook it, letting the cold through to his body, coughed, wept and explained the situation to Rozka, who had bounded away from him in fright "There you are, Rozka, done! And you were afraid, idiot! You thee, need teaches what need demands. . . I've become a surgeon's mate.. F-g-h it!"

The sick girl came to herself not knowing where she was and who was before her. She saw the face of a person leaning over her, a face in which she could distinguish neither brows, nose nor lips—everything was hidden by a dark mist. There were only the eyes, flickering with living moisture and gleaming with a greenish, quiet, soothingly domestic light, and from the narrow mouth, half-open with curiosity and excitement, came the smell of roast cedar nuts and something else burnt, seeming to swirl perceptibly and vividly—tobacco, she realised. A man was before her. He had been smoking in the corner and now, suddenly galvanised by her movement, was crushing a cigarette in his fist. A feeble stream of smoke, spent and purified of nicotine, still seeped from his nose and mouth "An old man's Smoking?" To herself she seemed to make a brisk grab, but in fact she feebly drew the blanket on to her chest and was conscious of her body, pressed down from above by a thick bulk, felt the pain in her bones and under her shoulder-blades, the spinning in her head and moved her lips, parched to blackness, to ask the question which people who have been resurrected always do:

"Where am I?"

One of the old man's eyes started, disappeared again. . . .
and a little later she discovered with her . . .

that the eye had winked at her! For some reason this frightened her.

"Just think, you've pulled through!" There was a note of a movement above and something sweetish and sour was poured into her mouth, penetrating her entire weary, baked body. "Just think, you're lying on a beach in the Crimea!" the stranger replied with great cheerfulness and wiped her skinned, cracked lips, which were sore from the hot drink.

Akim became a "surgeon's mate", a sick nurse, and a orderly—all the personnel of a hospital in one. For a long time Rozka could not get used to the hospital smell that flooded the hut. Rozka could not tolerate the poisonous odours at all, so she sneezed the chemicals out of herself and sighed heavily as she fidgeted behind the stove—Akim kept her locked in the hut all the time as an alarm-clock.

When Elya had recovered sufficiently to be able to comprehend everything she saw and even to speak, she said with the tenderness of lucidity:

"A doggy-y!" And she stretched out her hand to stroke Rozka.

Just as if she understood everything, Rozka also looked tenderly at the sick girl and wagged her flamboyantly curved tail but was too shy to approach. Akim took the dog by the scruff of its neck and thrust it towards the bed. When she touched Rozka's cool, soft fur with trembling fingers and felt under her palm the edge of a far from sharp-edged ear covered with sensitive hair Elya whispered tearfully "A doggy-y!", as if liberated from its burden.

Rozka licked the girl's hand and lay down softly beside the plank-bed with her muzzle on her outstretched paws, looking devotedly at her. From then on she lay down in the very same place whenever she came into the hut and fixed her eye unwinkingly on the girl, dozed and immediately opened her eye when she heard a movement on the bed. She would lick Akim's face as he lay on the floor, bring her wet nose into contact with his ear and sneeze loudly—the sick girl had woken up and needed help. "Can a female understand another female, even if it's women and dogs?" Akim wondered, delighted without knowing why and chattering like a sick nurse in a hospital, ceaselessly teasing Elya just as if she was a small child and thus ending in smoothing over the awkwardness inevitable in relat-

ons between someone who is helpless and the person nursing him.

The tension and awkwardness increased as her health improved and she began to comprehend better and see more. She discovered that the master of the hut was not an old man at all, even worse, he was not merely young, but also shy. With every day the embarrassment between them increased and she looked forward eagerly, with painful, really agonising impatience to the day when she could go outside the hut herself. But her temperature did not fall for a long time; towards evening it rose two or three degrees and she still reeled and felt dizzy and tired quickly, even from conversation. And the clearer her thinking, the more distinctly Elya understood what an uncommunicative, to use a modern term, creature a woman is! For the first time it occurred to her to wonder how those unfortunate girls, who were her age, had earned out their work in wartime at the front among men, in the trenches, on the march and, especially, in freezing weather.

She began to retreat into herself. Akim noticed this immediately and devoted all his ingenuity to guessing when and for how long he should go out of the hut, what to put on view and what to conceal, what to see and what not to see, what to talk about and what to avoid talking about. From the way he did this—perseveringly, imperceptibly and as a result, often clumsily—it was not hard to grasp that he knew little about women and had had little contact with them, judging by his conversation and his reminiscences, he had simply not been used to regard his mother as a woman. His mother was his mother—that was all.

When Elya went outside for the first time, asking Akim not to accompany her, he grumbled quietly. "Are you sure, now, all at once, by yourself?" But he complied with her request and she was almost knocked off her feet by the wind. Crasping from the cold and the snow, which made her head spin, from the sensation of the sky, living light and living world, from the sight of trees and bushes, the path to the river, tracks in the snow, from everything that she was seeing as if for the first time, Elya stood holding the wall and feeling with her palm the smoothness of the wood. She looked and remembered that here, beneath her hand, where the wood was freshly hewn, a filthy remark had been written with a knife or a piece of charcoal. For some reason the deeper "A German had not had the perception to cut off the
an axe, while this fellow, who had grown up

settlement, tried to be tactful and discreet, he was not always successful, he did not always manage to be "impenetrable," as he tried—that was the important thing!

Unexpectedly, something like an enclosure emerged behind the hut—a few fir trees were leaned up against the supports, raised from the sides by branches and poles. The enclosure was richly heaped round with snow; there were no draughts and it was warm. Returning from the yard with lowered eyes, Elya would cover herself up to the eyes and he dully, while the "pana" coughed perplexedly, trying to guess what his latest blunder had been. He stayed outside the hut longer, thumping an axe and sawing fir sawed up the boat and was fashioning a small cart from the front section. After bending the boat's coaming into runners, Akim nailed them to the sawn-off dug-out and fitted board flooring to the back. The result was something like a sledge.

"We'll soon be going," Elya speculated. She became a little frightened, although she had been waiting for this day like Christ's resurrection. Something was drawing Akim. He was milking the taiga, breaking the ice on the Ende and setting lines.

Total, quiet autumn lay on the taiga.

Even before snow had fallen Akim had scoured all the nearby woods and made a clean sweep of the whortleberries, which he bottled and kept in the attic in baskets, woven during the long nights while sitting at the sick girl's bedside; he had gathered and frozen rowan berries and dried bird-cherries and bilberry leaves. Elya was amazed as she observed his constant activity—why was so much of everything needed? Did they intend to spend the rest of their lives here, then? A city dweller, she did not know how much sustenance a person requires if he obtains it himself and is stocking up for a long winter. You could not get 100 grammes of this and 200 grammes of that at the shop or the market here. The hunter himself was struck by his own qualities as a housekeeper—where had they come from? It was a long time since he lived in Boganida, he had grown used to being a rolling stone, not caring where he laid his head, there was always a place at the table and if food was tight, well, then—a piece of bread, a pinch of salt, a mug of water—and go on living.

Now this fly-by-night saved every crumb in the hut, eating game birds almost without bread and heavily salting the meat so

that it smelled less. The forest birds had switched from berries to buds and alder cones and smelt of decay. This smell did not leave Akim even at night; his stomach burnt and there was a bitterness in the middle of his chest which he tried to stifle with berries and nuts. Elya was irritated by his peasant miserliness, but Akim, indifferent to her caprices, tried to give the sick girl varied meals, so that she should become stronger more quickly—soup, meat, a strip of salted grayling or a piece of salted salmon fillet to start with, then soup and meat, bottled cloudberrries or whortleberries and sometimes even a spoonful of condensed milk for afters.

When the Ende had been turbulently rolling snow and sludge downstream, sealing up the river before one's eyes with ice along the banks and erasing its curve from the earth like a flourish from an exercise-book with a pupil's rubber, Elya had lain between life and death and there had been no time to gather stores. However, as soon as she was a little better and could be left in the hut with Rozka—they agreed that, if anything happened, she should release the dog, which would find its master—Akim began to go farther away. The Ende had frozen only along its banks, unfrozen patches steamed everywhere and Akim, fearing to fall through and perish, set lines for burbuts or speared tardy, dissolute, lone graylings, which had not swum down with the other fish to Kureyka and had become stuck in deep pools in the stream, there. God grant, to remain throughout the winter. There might have been a hope of the burbuts running, but they would scarcely run here in large numbers—the Ende was constricted for the plump settler, there was no room in the impetuous currents and there were few stretches of washed sand where they could cast their roe. The burbot that appeared were rare and small in size. Akim made Elya eat burbot liver.

"Eat! Fatten yourself up, you haven't been out, the snow blinds and you can loathe your sight. Fish fat is the best thing for your eyes and burbot liver is pure fish fat."

The tension that could be detected in Akim and the way he behaved, his long and painstaking preparations for the trip suggested that getting out of the taiga was difficult and dangerous. But from the viewpoint of a warm hut, of a dwelling with adequate, if frugal, food supplies, the dangers and the difficulties did not seem very terrible to Elya. People travel, after all on foot or sledges. They would reach a camp, God willing, reach

people—he was almost strong again, she would not have to drag it out?

Akim earned harems slung around him by their tails for them and stocked up with meat for Rozka, remembering an ancient rule: what you feed a dog is what he will catch. He dried the fur from the hare pelts, made a distaff from two birch carved a spindle from the top of a fir tree, roasted it on coals and taught Elya to spin the fur into yarn. He found two spools of thread in the pocket of Gertsev's rucksack and he had five spools of his own; to pass the time in bad weather he intended to mend a net, also unearthed from the dead man's bag, but the boys had done everything thoroughly and no matter how Akim labored he could not loosen the tight mesh. That meant it would have to stay as it was; they would take the net with them and at a hummocky ice-hole, in a little inlet cut off from the river by the mouth of warm springs, he would slip it under lumps of ice and perhaps catch some gaping-mouthed fish lurking there.

The days became shorter and shorter and the more rapidly the shortened, the more crowded they became for the hunter. He had been guilty of two stupid actions before setting off for the hunting season. He had not taken a "Friendship" saw—what did he need it for? "I'm not a wood-cutter, I'm a hunter. I'll cut up wood for the winter with a bow saw." He had also waved aside a radio transmitter. "I haven't got a girl to chatter to and learning to use a transmitter takes a long time. Where's the time? Who will buy for me?"

Akim sawed and sawed to the point that Elya once said "What do you keep scraping away for? It's intolerable. You've saw my heart in half!"

Like everyone worn out by illness, she was in a state of nervous exhaustion. The living dark wave of her hair ran on to be bleached hair, sweeping over the artificial mink and washing it away. Inside, too, Akim guessed, something had died away and changed in her. Shy of the complex world of this woman that was beyond his understanding that had shuddered and broken in was now again acquiring colours, sounds and movement as perceived everything afresh, Akim decided not to worry her with questions, but, on the contrary, to free her of bad memories, to distract her. He should long ago have suggested to Elya that she

ut off this two-tone hair—a lot of soap went on it, but maybe she like it that way? "We'll manage somehow—let her show off."

Akim took the saw-horse further away—Elya had no idea how much wood was used in a night and how much more would be needed—the hard frosts had not yet begun. That was why it was impossible to set off now—the ice on the Ende was thin and they might fall through an unfrozen patch or sink in the marshes.

Akim gradually involved her in the chores, asking her to sweep the floor, to darn or to cook something and not without pride she would take the broom or sit down with her needle. But even this seemed hard work to her, for, to tell the truth, she had yet to find out what real work was. However, it was good that she could at least use a needle, sweep a floor and wave a duster around, cook up something and not over-salt it—for some reason these townsfolk were always nimble with their tongues only, they over-salted food, burned porridge and sometimes even burned themselves at the camp fire.

In the mornings the autumn crust of frozen snow gleamed and crunched underfoot. Akim managed to check a dozen of the snares placed near the hut and three traps on the other side of the stream, running from one to the other, he shot five or six squirrels, taking Rozka with him for this reason. A debt was a debt and at least a part of it had to be worked off; no one would meet it or write it off and he would be held responsible—rogue, they would say, rascal, you swindled the office.

Elya was bored and a little frightened alone in the hut and the better she became, the more she was tormented by loneliness. However, she did ask Akim not to roam the tain, not to leave her all over the tain for pleasure, not to neglect even for herself, not to toss the carcasses of animals up, crunching the bones, not to ask for anything of him.

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Akim carried hares slung around him by their tendons, gutted them and stocked up with meat for Rozka, remembering the ancient rule: what you feed a dog is what he will catch. He shared the fur from the hare pelts, made a distaff from two hunk, carved a spindle from the top of a fir tree, roasted it on oak and taught Elya to spin the fur into yarn. He found two spools of thread in the pocket of Gertsev's rucksack and he had five spools of his own, to pass the time in bad weather he intended to unravel a net, also unearthed from the dead man's bag, but the latter had done everything thoroughly and no matter how Akim laboured, he could not loosen the tight mesh. That meant it would have to stay as it was, they would take the net with them and in a hummocky ice-hole, in a little inlet cut off from the river by ice, in the mouth of warm springs, he would slip it under lumps of ice and perhaps catch some gaping-mouthed fish lurking there.

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What do you keep whispering away for? It's no kettle. You'll see my heart in half."

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flowers with seven petals, which blooms in July and is considered a live poison as well as a medicine. Wherever he saw it, Akim invariably plucked this magical herb and now he spontaneously brewed tea from his stock, giving it to the sick girl as a sleep draught.

The hunter's hands were covered with blood, red and grey, he was stuck to the fingers.

"Revoltin'! Re-voltin'!" Elya knocked the mug from Akim's hand and covered her face with her hands.

Not guessing immediately what the matter was, Akim picked up the mug; reluctant to waste something valuable, he scraped the soggy stems of the herb from the floor, strewed them behind the stove on a piece of iron and said, trying to control himself but with hostility nevertheless breaking through:

"It's revoltin' to dress yourself up in furs! Vacant eyes, everything living ripped off, looks like a length of gut—and she wears it round her neck! What a nightmare!" Then he got a grip on himself, he was tired, of course, and his nerves were stretched, but all the same he was a man and this was a sick person, unhappy, fastidious and not herself, a person from the town, from Moscow itself. He, on the other hand, was used to everything, a man of the forests and the tundra, not married, free. He calmed himself and continued peaceably: "A hunter gets furs in order to live—he doesn't wear them himself." And remembering how his faithful friend Kolka had hunted on the Dudypa, he added, "He hasn't got time to think about furs! Maybe he'll have a bad season and then he'll be left with no trousers to wear..."

"Everything about your life here is upside down!"

"Maybe everything there is downside up..."

"What do you mean, there?"

"Well, where you are, say?"

"Don't generalise!" Elya sobbed. "You roam about the forest, going God knows where after those animals! I'm alone, all by myself ... it's frightening, awfully frightening! Don't go, please, don't, eh?"

"She doesn't understand. She's used to having everything done for her. She thinks everything grows or is caught all by itself," Akim thought in distress, going out to his traps after Elya had fallen asleep.

Once he followed the trail of a sable for a long time, stumbled into a snow drift, lost the ski-track and wandered about, reaching



After that incident he did not go out to the taiga at night checked his snares and tracked sable in daylight, his bled when he saw how dense the sable trails were, or because no one had hunted on the Ende for a long time because lack of food had driven the animals from the north fringe to where there was a good supply of nuts and where squirrels, birds, mice and all kinds of other creatures had collected. Hazel-grouse thinned out on the Ende, the squirrels became cautious, animal trails grew denser, the sable circled around more widely and the paw prints came together less frequently, but evidence of scuffles was encountered more and more often—established sable would defend its territory, while a wandent sable would try to drive it off. Victory went to the stronger.

And now came a new, inevitable misfortune: the squirrel, sable, polecat and ermine were followed by the polar fox, wolf and wolverene. When he was late in coming to his snares the hunter found the paw or a piece of the fur of a sable in the closed traps. In good weather he had to visit his snares more frequently, make traps for the polar fox and hunt the wolves and wolverenes. Hunters get almost no sleep at such times. They hunt, trap and collect furs, for eventually the animals will go away again and the hunting time end: then you can sleep your fill.

Akim gritted his teeth, cursed and almost howled, seeing how success was slipping away from him. He hurried to finish his domestic chores which took so much time! He dashed out into the forest for an hour or two, roamed about close to the hut on skis and tramped round a dozen traps. Greased, new, good traps had been left unattended—a wolverene emptied them of small animals and wood-grouse and had become so impudent that it even approached the hut and scratched Rozka. On a terribly dark night Akim chased it, this marauding wolverene, fired and apparently wounded the beast, but lacked the strength to reach it and finish it off. He ought to make a "horn" trap for the vile creature—he had seen one once in the taiga, on the Sym, a simple-looking trap but cunning. The wolverene climbed on to the "horn" and removed the bait from the spike; then, although so wily in other matters, it slid down the smooth surface of the "horn" backwards, seeing no point in jumping off, and impaled its snout on the sharpened end.

The further winter advanced, the more the polar fox hunted,

which meant that once again, as in the year when Kolka had knocked about Taymir along the Dudypa River, there was a plague among the lemmings in the tundra and hunger drove the animals out. The snow was not yet deep, the winter was not biting especially hard—later severe frosts would suddenly wrap the land in a white blanket—and hold on to your hat! So far the frost was mostly on the tree-tops, uncommon weather for the time, you could make money in a season like that, but . . . Well, there it was, you had to clear up Goga Gertsev's mess! They had agreed to shoot it out, but now he had outsmarted him and taken even greater revenge by dumping his property in the winter quarters and with an added burden to boot...

Oh, that added burden!

She had no idea of helping him, which also meant, herself, no understanding of the necessity to work, work, work in order to live, to subsist. Although something had changed in her, she still believed that someone else should do the mundane, dirty, tedious jobs for her, a person supposedly of another, higher kind, while all she had to do was to reflect on what had been done, dividing everything into two parts—what she liked and what she didn't.

She had recently flown into a fury, throwing almost the entire carcass of a hazel-grouse at the door: "I can't eat another one! I'm fed up! They smell of grass! There's something bitter about them! It's intolerable!.. " Rozka picked up the carcass, squeezed it between her paws and looked at Akim. He took the grouse from the dog, tossed it into a birch-bark basket over the stove and savagely spooned up the bird soup, conscious of his nausea and revulsion towards it.

Elya turned to the wall, unable and, perhaps, unwilling to subdue her character, snivelling.

"Why have I got to put up with all this stuff?" Akim thought. "I should chuck it and go away!" And knowing that he never would do this and curbing the fury bubbling in him, he said in his flattest tone:

"In Moscow you'll tell people about the holiday camp you lived in here and how you didn't eat grouse and they'll have a good laugh!"

"In Moscow? Where's Moscow, then?" It was precisely his vedute indifferent tolerance of everything around him that infuriated her and he, feeling the hostility and nascent enmity between them, patiently explained

"Moscow? Moscow's a long way away and the shops you'll be there, with whatever you want, or the department stores are close, either—and food's become harder to get here and with us it'll become even harder. We'll have to clear off and quick. To go to Moscow you'll need strength. To build up your strength you need to eat, to eat you need to bring down an elk, if not an elk then a deer, if not a deer, then a wood-grouse, if not a wood-grouse, then a partridge, if not a partridge, then at least a hawk-grouse..."

A sparse, curly beard had grown, fluffy, on Akim's emaciated face and a mane of hair hung to his shoulders—a young gall on a city boulevard would be beyond price with foliage like this. In the taiga, though, long hair was a hindrance, a tiresome hindrance: it became sweaty, it froze, it got dirty, there was a time to wash or cut it, time and soap went on his guest, he had bought supplies just for himself and not spent too much on toiletries—a bottle of eau-de-cologne, a tin of strong-scented vaseline to smear on hands, lips and cheeks cracked by water and wind, a couple of cakes of scented soap, another five or so of laundry soap and, to "snow off", a bottle of shampoo—the last pressed on him by the sales-girl in a hardware shop, who praised the elegant bottle with its screw-on cap to the skies and told him that it could be used as a brandy-flask after it was empty. Akim washed the sick girl's hair with the shampoo—there was a lot of foam, the hut smelled like a hairdresser's salon and the hair quickly became clean, ceased to split at the ends and rolled down in living torrents—so the shampoo turned out to be useful and he had thought it fun.

"Akim, let me cut your hair," Elya proposed and lowered her eyes guiltily. "I should do something at least to help you."

"You should," he agreed severely. "go outside, collect wood, cut twigs, clear snow, knit yourself a warm hat and scarf—we'll make clothes and boots together, since the thought of winter didn't come into your head while you were having a fine time in summer."

"If I must, I must," Elya agreed. "I remember that I did sew dresses for dolls and I made some sort of apron for my mother on Woman's Day. I've never picked up a pair of scissors, though, but I've seen how they mow people about in hairdresser's shops... Oh—

"My late progenitress's favourite flowers," he explained, with his invariable crooked grin, and after dinner disappeared somewhere. He returned wet and exhausted.

"You weren't looking for gold, were you, by any chance?"

"Why not?" he replied. "It wouldn't be a bad thing to present the state with a little gold-field, say, and pay off all your debts at once—for being taught, fed, stuffed with morals—I don't like being in debt. And there is gold, everywhere around, but it's all in the form of these grains. Here, haven't you ever seen it?" He tossed a small bundle to his companion.

Elya undid the piece of cloth curiously. The specks of gold resembled flecks of fat skimmed off the skin of heated milk that was already old, darkened and dried out; they stuck to the cloth like fish-scales, neither burning nor shining. "Men die for metal!" For this?

"Bran!" Gertsev remarked carelessly, taking the handkerchief from her and binding it round his finger with the adroitness of a conjurer.

"If you find a deposit, a gold-field, will they name it after you?"

"What? Ah-ha! I wouldn't mind. But the main thing would be to receive a round sum and be quits for ever with the stupidity of youth. I'd pay the alimony on my daughter at fifty ounces a month until she reaches her majority once and for all."

"That's not very generous for the discoverer of a gold-mine!"

"Children shouldn't be spoiled!"

"Oh, you're a clever one! Really cl-e-v-er!"

"All I am is practical. Don't you think so?"

"Yes. All the same, there's a whiff of charlatanry about it."

"H-m, perhaps you aren't precise—it's dilettantism, rather. But a clever director calmed me when he said 'there aren't enough dilettantes in contemporary art'—I think that's true of science, too."

"You fill the gap?"

"Someone has to suffer for society."

"There are more than enough people who say they want to suffer for society!" Elya said acidly and her protector's gaze immediately grew dark. The axe that he was whetting stuck in his fingers as they tested its sharpness, his movements slowed, sediment within him swirled up, blinding and twisting him, and if he had not mastered himself, if he had let it overwhelm him, he

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What was it? — a faint melody? —
 The wind alone was whispering,
 Blowing the wisest when he needs it,
 Flung by the wind alone.

•

The dunes are dark beneath
 The desert sun heat without rest,
 A lioness lies with her mane down,
 Shapes may be seen.

The beast is asleep by a palm-tree
 That white is that treacherous trail
 The lawless, but by a twist,
 Lies, rusted, alone, quite dead.

He having gained his full strength yet,
 Blood-smeared, dazed, alarmed,
 The lion-cub springs up in fury
 And wounded, slumps to the ground.

He grows up unhappy and hostile,
 Christened with fatal fire
 And knows that far off in the desert
 His mate dreams of him with desire.

Half-closing his heavy eyelids,
 Recalling the wound in his side,
 He pictures the raging sandstorm,
 The dunes where his mother died.

Proud to this day, though weary,
 In captivity having grown wise,
 The grey-furred, rebellious lion
 In his heart to the desert flies.

•

No sooner has elapsed one sparkling night,
 Lascivious and miserly old whore,

6. 1

as a proof-reader on a newspaper. Her father had, after going, helped her mother to complete her studies and dragged scientific institute. Under pressure from her mother he had written a thesis, but somehow he had found the strength to let out, sever the ties of home and work, go into the field and himself in the forests. After some four years he had sent a confused letter, which her mother had, from absent-minded left on the kitchen table.

Being a curious adolescent, Elya, finding this letter, read it and am forever obliged to you but I cannot live like this. I feel as here. Enjoy your freedom, and let me be on my own too."

Her mother had not thrown a fit or complained to the Publishing Organisation. By that time she was working as a senior editor in a newly-formed publishing house, the offices of which were located between a hardware shop and a funeral director's. The offices, as was said, were temporary, but this had been forgotten, and a mummy still worked in a cupboard of a room, the shutters of which window of which looked out right on to the funeral director's yard. However, this did not depress the staff of the new publishing house in the least. Behind the jammed-together desks where, if the editor was sitting at her desk, her author had to perch himself. Mother advanced Soviet literature, believing that it was the publishing house, thanks to her efforts and those of all the staff, that would publish not simply the best but also the most stirring books, which other publishing houses would refrain to print. Mother often worked at home because of the cramped rooms at her office. Authors from the provinces or unregistered "geniuses" from the capital for whom mother was "interceding" were always hanging about their apartment and staying the night, sleeping on the camp-bed which jangled with springs torn badly out with the fabric. The walls of the apartment—fortunately built to old specifications, otherwise the inhabitants would have been turned out because of the noise and disturbance—shook with raised voices: "The language must be protected! It's been ridden to death, like an old nag!"—"We'll struggle some more! We shall advance it, yes!"—"No, you listen now, listen:

*'How good the wine that boils in every vein,
The wholesome bread baked for us in the oven,
The woman who, after inflicting pain,
Gives us the joy of being loved and loving'*

rite these lines, and can die happy!"—"That's not all, listen to
s:

*'Do not believe a poet, maiden,
For he will drive you to despair
Along a path with sorrow laden,
Beware a poet's love, beware!'* *

hat mush! Why, for daring to show them a verse like that they'll
ck you out of the publishing-house. An insult to poetry, they'll
y."—"Not all, my love, not all!" cried her mother, deeply
rred, now entering the debate amid wreath of cigarette smoke.

One absent-minded poet thrust a tea spoon into the pocket of
s jacket instead of a pen, obliged mother to drink cheap red
ine with him and finished by marrying a young barmaid, after
hich he grew fat from drinking beer, bought himself a mini-car,
ave up writing poetry and would not recognise mother when they
et.

Then a certain Karepanov from Udmurtia appeared—the
spring of a colourless Votyak and a buxom Russian woman. In
dmurtia he spoke and wrote only in Udmurtian. In Moscow he
oke and wrote only in Russian. He pretended to be as quiet as
mouse and without a home. Mother, of course, took the "or-
han" to her bosom, brought his stout novel about the advanced
ountryside of today "up to scratch" and registered him in her
wn apartment. When, at last, the novel, for which mother had
elped the author to obtain his fees in advance and which had
ready become impossible not to publish, came out following
pheavals and delays, Karepanov grabbed one of the three rooms
a mother's apartment by going to law. Father had by that time
ost his Moscow registration, mother, gripped by the element of
terature, having forgotten to remind him about this, perhaps,
ndeed she did not know the passport laws. Karepanov, on the
ther hand, knew everything.

Even before she had had time fully to recover in hospital after
he skirmish with Karepanov, mother discovered an even more
ifted writer from some remote inlet or other. This thinker, whose
ame was Pupkov, worked as a lumberjack. In literature, too, he
wrote as if he were chopping wood. Direct, tounded, he was that

* Translated by

rare author who impressed Elya. She could not hear the swarm of writers which poured through their apartment through a trans-shipment depot, although her children had got a smattering of literary jargon, freely read the poems, dropped the names of fashionable poets and could be a connoisseur. She lavished her attention on dear Pupkin, kept him up in the kitchen. Mother clutched at her heart as she wrote on Pupkin's manuscript.

"Tikhon, you're marvellous! I think we'll make a real man of you! Just study, study. Knowledge of life, even if superfluous, is enough! — "What's that, I don't understand anything! Well, I'll get into the Writers' Union and try for a place in literature courtne."

Pupkin did, indeed, turn up for the literary courses in May. One day, without telephoning or giving prior warning, he came into their flat wearing a magnificent overcoat with an Astrakhan collar and a shaggy dogskin cap, swept Elya and her mother into a bearhug, lifting them up and spinning them round, extracted a large chunk of the choicest smoked fish from his case and thumped a bottle of vodka on the table—"We're going to have a whale of a party!"

They sat and talked. Tikhon boasted of how many "classical" books he had read and of the birth of yet another son—even though it was fine.

Mother, mother! How was she now? After all, she had not lived and worked only for the sake of the Karepanovs but had also spent her life on her, her daughter and that daughter, accurate numbskull that she was, had not understood it! She had not understood her mother's life, at first glance shapeless, disorderly and meaningless, had not understood that for all her mistakes mother had discovered, cosseted and "saved" an entire mass of genuinely gifted writers. Most important of all, she was always among people and necessary to people and when, after finishing school, her ultra-intellectual daughter, unhappily stung by a love that was soon over, plunged into despair and pessimism and never went out of the house, tormenting herself with gloomy soliloquies mother had said so sadly and so seriously: "Loneliness is a misfortune, my dear. Proud loneliness is playing at misfortune and there is nothing more base than that game! Only self-lovers and mentally abnormal blockheads can allow themselves to indulge in it."

Elya understood! She had got the point! When things got tough, she had got the point! And mummy looked quite different and her life, jammed with work and cares, shone with a different light and there was no one better than mummy and God grant at she return home and withdraw her papers from the Literary Institute she had entered, following a fashionable trend of the time—the children of writers all strive to become writers now, and the children of actors all strive to become actors.

And she would enter... What would she enter, then? Well, it was still too early to think about that, but she would study a serious, useful profession and never, never leave her mother, she could sit at home all the time, cook and wash and clean and never do anything at all to hurt mummy.

There was a rustle and a squeak by the door and warning enough. Elya touched her face, wiped her eyes and threw open the outer door of the hut. The "pana" was entirely covered with raggy hoar-frost, fur hat, scarf, eyebrows and each tiny, invisible hair on his face wrapped in white moss. The slits of wind-lashed eyes gleamed from under his wet eyelashes, his lips were swollen with cold, his felt boots rang like stone and there was immense exhaustion in his every movement.

"Why do you stay out so long? It's freezing outside!" Elya almost blurted out the words, but she was able to choke them back in time and helped the hunter to take off his outer clothes, pulling his felt boots from under the bottoms of his heavy trousers.

Remaining barefoot, Akim sat relaxed on a block of wood, immobile for some time; at last he stirred and let out a sigh.

"God, I'm whacked!" Extracting four small burbots, a frozen partridge and a hare with a wire loop round its neck from his bag, he shoved the bird and the hare on to the logs behind the stove, split open the burbots, which had revived in the warmth and begun to move about in the willow basket, removed their insides and separated out the liver.

"Rest and get warm, I'll cook," Elya proposed. Akim silently held out the knife to her, washed his hands, sat down by the stove, lit a cigarette and neither moved nor spoke while the water in the cauldron heated and boiled. They sat "blind", without light, and only the glow of his cigarette and the grey blanket of tobacco smoke below, floating away into the fire-box, showed that Akim had not fallen asleep.

"What's the matter?" Elya asked, touching his ^{wrist} rough hand and holding her palm on his bony ^{wrist} ^{which} burned from the cold.

"The frosts are beginning and the snow's already up ^{on} knees in low places," he said immediately. "If we don't this week, we'll have to stay here till February and keep ^{on} murtsovka * And we'll keep going to the end... But even if an elk, Rozka and I find a bear's lair, you're still a sick p played out, you need good food or you'll get TB... The si groats should last for a month, if they aren't thrown ⁱⁿ handfuls, as you've just done. And then?"

The scattered salt crackled on the stove. All Elya was ^{of} was to perceive this light crackle as a reproach for ^{et} gance, the rest was so serious that she could not ^{immed} grasp the meaning of Akim's words and the renewed silence heavily on her.

"Well, if I have to go, I have to go," she said with ^{er} brightness. "If it's this week, then so be it. The sooner the ^{be}

"It's two days' march along the Ende to Kureyka. I've ^{is} along the Ende—it's frozen almost everywhere. There are ^{is} and whirlpools on the Kureyka and holes in the ice near ^{is} them you fall in, you won't come out again... The two of us won't over the mountains—you'd slip and fall and be covered ^{is} in scree." Akim continued to instruct Elya or to think aloud ^{is} in same barely audible voice. "If we got past the rapids the ^{is} Kure could be frozen everywhere, and it wouldn't matter with middle churned up with hummocks or fallen branches. We ^{is} go along the Kureyka to Grafiny station by the bank or a ^{is} pe over a hill or through the taiga. Are there people living ^{is} the Good question! I haven't been along the Kureyka for a long ^{is} tu Got into the way of flying, you thee? Walk through to ^{is} Kure Kureyka? But there certainly won't be anyone there. From ^{is} Kure Kureyka across the Yenisei, right to the capital—Kureyka. ^{is} I m, that's a tidy march!"

* Murtsovka—bear's fat taken from the entrails rolled up into a ^{is} b with ruskas. Can be carried about for years in a bag where it beco^{is} rancid and harden, when misfortune of hunger strikes in the ^{is} up crumbs are carved off the ball and boiled or simply chewed—the food ^{is} biter and nauseating, but very "strong" and one can survive on it for ^{is} au days. There are other forms of murtsovka—this is the only one with ^{is} au the author is familiar

"What shall we do, Akim?"

"Put the fish in the water!" Without opening his eyes, he added at the seething, spitting cauldron

"Oh, muddlehead!" Elya started and dropped pieces of fish, its r, bay leaf and a pinch of dried onion into the bubbling water from a wooden plate.

The broth ceased to murmur and everything was once again quiet in the hut. Akim relaxed in the warmth, his body slumped and his cigarette went out in his fingers. Elya could not find it in himself to disturb the master of the hut—let him think and decide.

Akim started and straightened his creaking back, rubbed it with his hand and smacked his lips around his cigarette, like a waking child with a dummy. The cigarette did not light. He stuck a twig into the fire-box, lit it, drew once or twice and continued his exposition, speaking more loudly with the same deep seriousness and smocking the silver of wood into the fire-box with his nail.

"There is another option, as our friends the geologists say: to cross the range along the river and move through the forest-landra. Lake Khantayskoye is about 50 versts away and there's a work-team from the Igarsk fish cannery there with a landing strip and a radio operator. Even if there isn't anyone there, maybe some kind of bedding or clothes or grub will be left in the barrack?" He twitched his nose, sniffing the air with nostrils stiff from the cold. "Take off the soup, I can smell it's ready. This affair needs chewing over," as the fisherman Grokhotalo says. "What a singer!" And the "pana" shook his head, driving away relaxing, rosy reminiscences.

Elya, who already knew by heart all about Akim's life in Bogatnida and on the *Bedovy* in particular, took up the theme that had struck a chord in the hunter's heart.

"There's no greater good for a man than to eat and drink and thus enjoy the fruit of his labour—that's an oriental proverb, so get yourself to the table, Akim."

"That's a good proverb—eating doethn't get in the way, either."

"And drink, the proverb says!" Elya set about tempting the hunter, deftly retrieving a flask of spirit from behind the head of the bed—this was kept more carefully than any possession of handruff. "Drink up, let yourself go!"

"I can't!" Akim's eyes were round.

"Don't use it all on my person"

much!" Elya insisted, hearing him swallow his spit frozen, worn out you're talking, and if you have a cold in fine form, your head will work better..."

"What's true is true."

"No question about it! It's been proved by the science," Elya went on, breaking down the hunter's stance. "I'll have a drop, too."

"Come on, then!" Akim whispered. After drinking washed it down with a spoonful of fish soup, something in himself and said with deep feeling: "I'll ask you for a long time—Elya, what's that short for?"

"Elvira."

"F-g-h it! What won't the intellectual think of hunter indignantly thumped his knee with his fist, looking with great sympathy. "But you're a good fellow all the I'll never chuck you. If we die, we'll die together, okay

"Okay, Akim, okay," Elya replied, lighting two and pleased most of all that Akim had again taken the usual "pana" she had known from probably every day on him in everything and believing everything that was were easy and simple with him and the word "die" was frightening: Akim and "die" just did not fit the kind of nonsense. She touched the hunter's shoulder and breathed warm on his ear. "Akim, you more? You won't frighten me?"

"I'll try."

"There's a clever chap! There's a clever chap!" delighted and gave him a smacking kiss on the cheek. "On, eat! You roam around the forest all lured by forest demons, you good-for-nothing playfully, making herself sound like a wife. "You'll run into an accident and I

"Good! Fine!" Akim gave her a pat on the head. "I lay behind this hectic playfulness, but I know you will be fine, Elya!"

She pressed herself to him and

"I forced myself on you, great and foot."

He stroked her hair, her thin back, with every small bone, so dear and helpless,

"All sorts of things happen in life... That's what it's like. People stronger than you kick the bucket..."

Elya was thoroughly upset by Akim's "respectable" speeches, wept even more profusely than before in sweet exhaustion, snuggled up closer to her saviour and protector, tickled his neck with a wet nose and gratefully kissed his ear. He clearly felt these tears washing away from him the dirt, the rubbish, all the trash that had imperceptibly accumulated in layers in his soul. And the soul was resurrected, elevated and bore him in itself lightly, renewed—the devil with it, this hunting, with the money he was paid in advance and with everything in the world! The most important thing had come about, he had gone to the white mountains and stopped in face of the realised miracle, of which he had long had a presentiment and for which, perhaps, he had waited. He had imagined it differently, but once it had come, had arrived, there was nothing more to wish—it had to be guarded and protected, earned in one's hands, for the miracle had turned out to be so fragile...

"Well, if we're going to have a party, let's have one!" Elya ended and shook the flask. "There's still plenty here! Drink up, Akim! Drink up! We'll be saved! We're too young to die! We shall live a long time! I shall never, never forget you!" Gripped by an upsurge of feeling, she embraced him tightly round the neck from behind, painfully squeezing his throat with her bony arms.

It was difficult for Akim to breathe. He felt her small, hollow breaths with his shoulder-blades and her breathing, jerky and hot by his ear, the sobbing breaths rolling inside her. A faint trembling began in him and he carefully parted her hands and stood up.

"I want to smoke," Akim said, swallowing the words, and lit up, drawing at his cigarette quickly and greedily. "And now it's time to sleep. We've had our party—that's enough! We have to get up early." As if justifying himself, he began to list the work that had to be done before they set off. Boots for Elya, cut out of an old hide, had to be finished, something at least a little like a jacket had to be sewn from a Nanbet and lined with old padded trousers, left behind by someone in the hut, a scarf and cap of hare down had to be finished, spare mittens and socks made from a ripped wooden sweater of Goga's had to be completed. Elya had already knitted a pair of thick, warm socks—now... her was needed. Mother had a sewing machine...

occasional garment for herself or her daughter before becoming completely absorbed by literature. She had taught Elya not suspecting how useful this would prove for the latter when she set off for the North to see her father, Elya's greatest wish had been not to forget her tennis racket and her nail varnish while Gertsev had loaded himself only with his own personal baggage; now she had to fit herself out from scratch, but infinitely delighted by Elya's skill—a real town puss, but knew how to ply her needle! She was a determined piece of sewing, neat in household matters and you could certainly bring her into something useful if you went about it seriously. But he did not show how pleased he was with her, fearing to hurt that pert but butter-fingered townie whom he had scorned and whom he had been angry and who had been broken and possibly even re-educated by necessity or by Akim himself.

"Oh, why should we finish our little party so early, you ask?" Elya sighed, shaking her head, apparently playfully. She was clearing the table. Then she swept the hut and curled up on the plank-bed, asking with a grin whether he had not recalled any other urgent task?

"I have," Akim affirmed imperturbably. "I have to knit your lungs."

"If you have to listen, you have to," Elya said, looking obediently pulling up her shirt and waiting for the "surgeon's mate". Her skin was covered with goose pimples, although it was hot in the hut. As he made ready for the examination or the "surgeon's mate" said with a laugh, the "session", he started the stove, but Elya, as always, was gripped by shivering.

"A thin man is cold even in hell." Like a true medical man, he masked the seriousness of his therapeutic work with a joke. "I put out the light?"

"Not at all!" Elya jerked the sharp corner of her shoulder, which, rounding in a hoop, the collar-bone began. "You doctor, after all," she added with forced courage, sensing embarrassment, "and patients shouldn't be shy of their doctors."

"Doctors!" He laid his gnarly, sharp ear to her back, patting the depression under her shoulder-blade. "I'm a horse-doctor, a doctor!" he grunted. And suddenly he chanted in a hoarse cockerel crow:

*Off with your blouse, dear,
And on to the hay!*

*I've been a horse-doctor
For many a day!*

He ran his ear hurriedly over her back, prodding the sensitively trembling skin—the "doctor" was backtracking! He was always like that—he'd blab out something that did not come off and then quickly take up some task. Who said that? Not me!

"Sometimes your jokes..."

"Shh! I'm listening..."

"Your vulgar jokes," she insisted, "are offensive to a woman and they don't suit you at all."

"I can't help it!" Akim removed his ear from her back and spoke distantly and sadly. "I learned how to behave in Boganida and on the *Bedovy*. Life taught me and that's that, I'm sorry. You're wheezing under the right shoulder-blade—I can't seem to hear anything under the left one. Do we go away or stay in the city?"

"Go away. And life hasn't anything to do with it. Nature gave us a mind and enough tact. So don't show off!" Elya angrily pulled her shirt down and slid under the blanket.

Akim sniffed loudly several times in perplexity, counted the drops and fiddled with the jar of herbal remedies, understanding that he should not quarrel with her today, he teased her as he gave her the thermos cap with the drops.

"You mean there's masses of everything in the big city?"

"Of everything!" Elya drained the thermos cap of medicine with a flourish, as if drinking vodka at a birthday party, and added in a voice husky from the bitterness of the curative potion, calling something from her own past: "Loads of everything."

"Great! Marvellous! So what?"

"You're a monster!"

"Thanks. Now take this powder as well..."

She obediently shook some kind of yellow powder, reeking of lime, into her mouth and washed it down with a real witch's brew that contained marsh tea, sweetbriar root, bark from a stunted elder-rose, a rare shrub in those parts, and bird-cherry-ems—absolutely everything that was, in the view of the "surgeon's mate", beneficial, apart from *sedmichnik*. That sovereign herb was absent—the supply had run out. Ranks, groats and flour had also run out, too—would have run out already if Akim had laid greatest emphasis on meat and nuts. He starved

himself, ate chance grub collected in the field and gave everyd that tasted nicer to her, guarding every crumb, every stem, n berry. Fixing her gaze on her feet, Elya suffered pangs, n breathless by a cough from the bitter medicine. She sat for a l time, her legs dangling from the plank-bed, looking at A below her, as if discovering something in him anew. He' embarrassed by her gaze and began mumbling again ab tomorrow's tasks, preparations for the journey and the frosts t would soon come.

"My nanny!" Not listening to him and not hearing him, E gratefully touched Akim's cheek with a cool palm. He caught l hand on his shoulder with his chin, brushing her bent wrist w his lips. "My dear, good nurse! Don't get me worked up, do torment me and don't torment yourself! I can hear you, y know, I can hear you twisting about on the cold floor, I'm not child, not a little girl... My surgeon's mate, my lord, man of t forest . Good .. Kind... If we die, we'll die together. To die li that... O-h, heavens!"

An oppressive silence hung over the cabin in the morning. Ely remained in bed. Akim lit the stove and heated up the almo untouched fish soup. He steamed rusks in a thermos contain over the stove and the kettle was already boiling. After eating rusk, he lit a cigarette and said, as if unto space, coughing loudly:

"Well, I'm off!" He stamped his feet on the threshold an repeated: "To the forest. To the taiga, that is. I'll have to remove my traps and take down my snares. We're off the day after tomorrow. So, you... get your threads together, finish your knitting, get the jacket sewn and fit yourself out... Mm, mm... Well, I'm off..."

"All right, go then."

"Why did I call him to me? I've led him astray. I've spoiled everything! I'm really my mother's daughter! I like to save people, too. The 'pana' was breaking his back on the floor, he was cold and uncomfortable. I was sorry for the boy. 'Boy'? But he was a sailor, had his fun with the port whores... O-h! Well, that's all! The devil with it! After all, it's even funny: two in the taiga, in a cabin... That's enough! No more! I'm getting up! I've got work to do—I'll try to save myself through work, like that cunning 'pana'."

Experiencing a rather bitter but, at the same time, pleasant

feeling of shame, Elya, somewhat belatedly and for the first time, understood and valued the uniqueness of those feelings which, no doubt, an innocent girl, in discovering the pleasure prescribed by nature, experienced and then carried within herself as a unique happiness known only to her. After crossing the invisible, complex border from innocence to what opened up the sweet and tormenting meaning of carrying on life, even if it was no bed of roses, even if there was only the promise of working days in it and a commonplace end to them, the joy of triumphant flesh would come, the happiness and pain of maternity would light up even working days with the glow of a perpetual holiday, if, of course, it was not celebrated in advance in some corner, in secret, lasciviously, and if two people preserved for each other the enchantment of the first shame, the trembling, the anguish—everything, everything that makes up the charm of coming together and the secret, their secret, eternal and never unravelled by anyone or repeated yet.

That foppish, overdressed poet whose book mummy "saved" had seemed long forgotten. Once he had invited Elya for a drive in his car; she was no problem to him—he got what he wanted crushing not only her soul but also seeming to tear the skin from her living body—and to a stayed, a naked person, nothing is any longer of significance. There had been encounters, oh yes, there had been encounters and there had been affairs, but the memory jealously retained the self-assured poet, baring his teeth like a dog and painfully digging his nails into her back. Later she learned from experienced women that the first sin and the first man do not fade, are not rubbed away by time—this stamp is eternal.

*"And casual all while our loves and hatreds,
He make no sacrifice to love or to
The coldness in our ancestors' delights upon us,
Yet in our blood breathes fire."*

"Oh, you! Oh, you! Where are we all hurrying to, then? Why are we so uncharitable to ourselves for all our self-love?"
Elya put on a sheepskin, wound a necktie and fastened her head

and put on his boots, having previously turned the uppers of the shoes. He drew them on to her feet, trying with her hands to keep the warmers steady on them. Akim had got rid of his high boots, which meant that he would not be frozen to small feet cramped for heat in warmth, proving that all people don't need much, women especially—leave them as they are and they'll begin to put it back on their feet and themselves to the warmth.

A thin, faint-edged dawn melted behind the darkness seen by the uneven scars of the mountain tops to the sky. The quietness all around lay so broad and dense that it seemed to be neither life nor movement anywhere. The forest grew more dense in its depths and from the distance of Lode, out of a burrow dug through the far-curt of the snow-blanketed woods a sledge-team emerged—the team itself was shaft-horned, a boatman's canvas strap over his shoulder, while Rozka, harnessed to a simple, raw-hide strap, spread out across the narrow track, busily picking a way for thin legs.

Loaded with fir trunks, the sledge moved along, scraping up white, white snow of the taiga before it.

Akim smiled from far off at El'ya and Rozka wagged her tail and curled it erect over her spine, but immediately let the tail fall down, stretched herself out over the snow and stuck out her tongue, gasping with the strain and even snarling a little as she helped her master haul wood for the cabin. El'ya dashed out to meet the team and went behind the sledge to push it with her hands.

"That's the ticket," Akim remarked, not turning. "Learn and you won't go hungry when you're old!"

* * *

They intended to leave at first light, but Akim checked and rechecked the pack to see that nothing was forgotten. He walked round the sledge again and again, tucking in something, tightening, binding, and El'ya realised that he just could not make up his mind to take the first step into the depths of the unbounded, watchful taiga: going away from the hut was like leaving an abandoned ship for the deserted sea.

While preparing diligently but with a light heart for the journey—clothes, boots and linen had long since been washed,

darned and repaired in advance—Elya did not cease to wonder at how easily, one might say playfully, a wandering, apparently experienced man of the taiga like Gertsev had made ready in summer for their trip. Perhaps it had been easy because it was summer. But perhaps even he had been seized by that thoughtlessness, had found himself wrapped around by that so-called "pink" cloud that envelops people carried away or in love. It's true that he had never loved anyone but himself, but he was certainly capable of being carried away. Let us ascribe everything to the summer and to the fact that both were healthy, free of everything and of concern for themselves, too, and took with them as much as could be easily carried, enough food for the time being and as much bedding as was needed and no more. They fitted into one sleeping bag—the proud wanderer could not permit a woman to freeze with him.

Elya looked round at the hut sunk into the snow, the door not held shut by a pole propped against it, but with the hunter's thin, strong, shaved stick thrust through the wooden handle—when you moved across the taiga on skis you used it to push, you felt out animal trails, pools in the river and holes in the marshes with it and, as Elya guessed from its reddened end, you also used it to finish off animals in traps—a necessary stick, cruel work and a harsh life, about which she now knew a great deal. She knew, for example, why doors in forest huts open inwards—if the hut becomes snow-bound, one can dig one's way out, while a marauding bear will not break its way in, for bears draw whatever comes their way towards themselves only. That was how inscrutably simple everything was.

"Well, say your farewells!" the hunter let drop almost in a whisper in the freezing pre-morning mist; surprised by the softness with which he spoke, he burst forth in a boyish falsetto: "Forward, comrades!", not allowing himself to fall prey to gloom.

The skis shuffled, the runners squeaked and Rozka howled, she jerked and was pulled on to her hind legs by the harness. She waved her paws, cockroach-like, in the air, fell back on the snow and glued herself sideways to her master's legs as they pulled the sledge together along the track stamped down towards the Ende. The polar snow was ploughed up and crumbled sandily under the runners and the feet of the travellers, squeaking in a quite unmusical way and crunching rustily as it crumbled. They stopped briefly by an ice-hole fenced off by small fir. The hole had been swept by snow and a thick lip of ice had formed round its rim. It

was slippery near the hole and during the night the surface of the hole had frozen over and become covered with what looked like a skin of pale fat; under the skin the living water moved, popped with bubbles. The abandoned ice-hole and the hut, too, were to live on for a time, growing cold. Elya glanced at the barely visible hut, rubbed out by the weak light, buried in the obscure depths of the taiga. Against the frozen, smooth sky the tip of the belt protruding iron chimney was clearly outlined and the remnant of warmth of the hut seemed to be flowing out above it, swirling subtly.

The track looped along the Ende. They moved forward vigorously for about two verstas, then stopped for some reason by a wind-blown bluff, stopped by the gales to its sand and ramped down by the trampling of hares and partridges, not far from which a dark Siberian cedar stood behind bushes choked with snow. Although its top was missing, it stood free like a hero throwing open its tattered breast to meet the northern winds thrusting everyone and everything aside, its thick lower boughs like paws thrown across the snow.

"Remember this place," Akim said, blinking his eye-lashes which were already covered with hoar-frost. He turned away for some reason, lowering or hiding something.

"Why?" Elya wanted to ask, then shivered and hunched her shoulders as she guessed. The sledge squeaked and moved on, Elya grabbed at it, but did not push; instead, she was pulled behind the sledge, glancing back beyond the bluff at the cedar, trying to make out behind or beyond it a grave or at least a hummock. There were plenty of hillocks, one for each fallen log, and dry stumps bristled thickly on the steep slope: a fire had raged there once or a storm had swept away the undergrowth and it was only further along the sky-line, along its lightening edge, that crosses were seen, and although she understood that these were the tops of firs, that place seemed to her like one unbroken grave-yard.

She hurried, picking her way, trying to leave this dead taiga behind as quickly as possible, but she felt that her legs were tied. It became more difficult to walk, which meant that the track had come to an end.

Elya did not push the sledge, only hurried, hurried, anxiously picking her way in her light, warm boots in order not to fall behind, not to be lost. Breathlessness gripped her chest and a cough rolled up. It persisted long and full in her chest; there

slashed her and struck until flashes of fire came in her eyes, until she was exhausted—she let herself down from the sledge, wheezed and spat in the snow and when at last the cough passed off, the rasping in her throat had subsided and she could see clearly, she discovered that the sledge was already far away. It was beyond the bend of the river, leaving a furrow rather than a trail in the crumbling snow, at the side of which frequent, small deep holes from Rozka's paws could be seen. "Where are you going? What about me?" Elya wanted to shout, but her legs were already carrying her forward by themselves along the sledge trail and when she felt easier she did not even notice this immediately.

There was a slight wheeze in her chest, but she walked, walked well, briskly and was not yet sweaty—Akim had ordered her to get on to the sledge the instant she became sweaty. Walking was out of the question when sweating. But riding—on whom? On the hunter, his hands almost touching the snow, his legs quite bent and straining, his neck, like a bird in flight, stretched out ahead, unnatural and thin? On this womanishly devoted, hard-driven little dog? No, no and again no! She would walk herself and reach where she had to go.

The morning thinned out the mist, rolling unhurriedly from the hut, which already seemed far away. "Dear little old hut! Farewell!"

She was sorry for something—maybe the hut? Such a cosy hut, in some way homelike, left alone in the winter forest. No one would light a lamp in it, no one would sit in darkness during the long, long evenings in the quiet hut smelling of smoke, nuts and tar.

*At the quiet hour when heavens talk with earth,
In the dim muck preceding dawn, in frozen gloom,
A great big bird, as black as night, stirs of a sudden
And aiming with its beak at a far star,
Hearing us vibrant call, pierced by its radiance,
Stretches out taut as string, calls on response,
And everything around them hushes down,
Attending to the song, mysterious, arousing ..
In it are telegraph tattoos and crackling, creaks and hisses—
And everything too hard to understand annoys,
And all that's inaccessible attracts us*

*Hunting and birds, but peaceful, unarmed enmity
 Who with their song tried hard to teach us love
 And kindness towards everything that lives.
 But here on earth he met them with lead fire, and treachery
 Not understanding that in the depths of heavenly oceans,
 In other worlds we earthlings might be taken for wild game
 And met with bullets fired into our hearts....*

Akim had, after all, found the paper with the poem written it that he had promised her. She had read it aloud the previous day by the stove, after they had collected everything, and it and there was nothing left for them to do with themselves. There was no need to fill the time with tasks for the morrow, their feelings of anxiety had to be muffled with something and the poem: Akim's friend turned out useful for this.

After reading the poem, they sat for a long time on Nockwood, leaning towards the door of the stove. Elya supported herself with the palms of her hands on her knees, not looking at the flames. Akim smoked, thinking about the day's march. What awaited them tomorrow? Elya moved to Akim, as if calming herself and him, and put her head on his shoulder. He touched her, protectively drew her soft shoulder and pressed her to him, silently encouraging her. "We should better sit under the warmth, calm and quiet, and go nowhere at all." Here, from a feeling of pity, of what and whom she did not know soon everything subsided and grew calm and Elya measured and already so familiar dancing of the flames in the riddled stove.

During the first day's march they covered, according to calculations, about twelve versts. To Elya it seemed less. The hunter painstakingly made camp, cutting, warming the ground with a camp-fire and erecting a shelter. He woke up frequently in the night, feeling Elya, pressing her clothes in under her back and pressing her to cover her. But the girl froze all the same. By morning she felt pain under her shoulder-blades and tight lumps under them. She was again surprised that they could feel anything from her entire body, but she said nothing, indeed, needed to say nothing, for he had learned

she felt from her face, her breathing and even the expression of her eyes.

As he heated tea on the camp-fire and toasted the flat cakes baked before they set out, the hunter probed his travelling companion with a worried gaze, then lashed their baggage irresolutely. He stood listlessly, surveying the sky and sniffing at the taiga; it seemed to Elya that if he found a forewarning there of bad weather he would turn back to the hut with relief—its advantages were still near at hand.

They went about a verst over even snow, punctured only by a hunter's ski stick; above the forest, which seemed to have sunk into the snow-drifts, the abandoned fire still smoked in a thin stream and their hearts contracted and their disquiet grew.

They came out on to the Kureyka quite unexpectedly—the march over the irregular carpet of fallen trunks, thickly covered with hillocks, was monotonous and tedious. In depressions criss-crossed with the tracks of small animals and partridges, honey-combed by ermine and mice, in places scattered with the husks of over-ripe cedar cones and peppered with the dead fir needles, it was dry and slippery; needles were falling and soon the frosts would come.

Elya had become inured to the monotonous movement, to the half-dozing state, to numbness. It had seemed to her that this would go on for ever: the squeak of the runners, the wheezing of the dog, the coughing, the shuffling, the taiga, the snow all around and the onward march, onward, onward...

Now they had reached the Kureyka. The winding ribbon of the river was jagged with the sharp edges of hummocks of ice piled up at its shoals and rapids, darkly marking the mainstream, the last movement of dense, solidified ice slush which had crawled up to the cliffs and stopped, rearing up. It was deserted and gloomy. Even the furry and snowy mush swept up by the ice-floe did not soften the river's inhospitality. Stony cold ran through the deep river valley cut between russet-coloured cliffs, which came down to it either sheer or crumbling. Snow sullied with small pebbles lay confidently in gullies and ravines, round boulders steamed, the sediment of warm springs gleamed in a branched pattern and the watery veins of torrents were swollen among the boulders. Occasional trees, utterly smashed, and the pebbles littering the ice added to the lowering gloom of a place already wild.

There was not a single animal track anywhere.

Akim lit a fire on the left, high bank, took his skin and skin down to the river. Ilya, who had fallen quiet and withdrawn on herself, remained by the fire, looking at the nightmarish mountains reaching up into the sky. In summer they had a black gleam, their white summits presenting themselves temptingly, but in winter they filled with heaviness, standing out as an immense dark mass—you did not immediately realize that the lowered air had covered up the white of the peaks firmly and for a long time, absorbing it into itself. Only the slopes, the gorges, the scree and the grey and dirty-yellow residual outcrops in the gaps between the mountains were visible. The mighty waves of saddles and passes rolled further and higher, raised up by russet-colored, weathered cliffs on which, Akim recounted, at an inaccessible height, on lonely larches, rubbing their rawhide straps, lay scorched coffins containing hunters and reindeer breeders sleeping an eternal sleep, inhabitants of these frighteningly silent regions, which gradually turn into foothills, hillocks and the featureless, smokily swaying tundra that, after the bare, stony district oppressing the eye and the soul seems a light, bright, welcoming land.

A dog barked on the river, two shots crashed and the barking broke off. Akim soon skied back to the fire and silently threw three partridges at Ilya's feet. She readily set about skinning them, blowing on her freezing fingers.

"There are as many partridges on the bushes as there is snow," the hunter said, hanging a cauldron over the fire. He lit a cigarette from an ember, stirred up the wood and narrowed his eyes. "But there's no road at all. There's an old, old furrow from a reindeer sledge—some fellow going to a hunting ground when there was still ice along the bank..."

The shades of evening came down. The short day, recalling a small, furry animal that was still moulting, would round the camp-fire, hid its frozen nose in the soft snows and tumbled onto the forests and mountains. The flames moved feebly, burning a small hole for themselves in the winter gloom, sometimes flaring up, trying to push back the cold heaviness of the night that pressed leadenly down on them from all sides, and then, crushed back into the melted patch under the fire, angrily shot sparks, hissed, wheezed and at last, worn-out, subsided. The little fire ran away in bitter smoke into the fir trees. But scarcely had the night crackled with frost than the smoke straightened up and drew fire

out of the snow, a flame stirred in the dry twigs, piled criss-cross, and whoofed into life and the sparks that fell into the smoke, swirling, flew high and long. Some, seeming not to be extinguished, stuck to the sky as stars and hour by hour gathered there more and more thickly.

They heated the tent with a mess tin of embers, but how could they heat the open air—and it so wide? They endured through the night, which seemed to have no end, with great difficulty. In the morning Akim chopped thick trunks for the fire, dumping them bottom-side up on the flames, and after instructing Elya not to move away, but to keep the fire alight, he took his gun, a rucksack of food, cartridges and a mess tin and skied away towards the river along the trail he had made the previous day. Rozka dashed off after her master, then immediately returned and wagged her tail inquiringly at Elya—why didn't she come? The girl patted her on the neck and pushed her towards the ski-trail. Rozka obediently trotted off in the direction commanded, but looked round all the time; then she picked up the scent and, immediately forgetting everything, burst into a fusillade of barks, her voice, balling in the frost, carrying far and wide, disturbing the sleeping taiga.

A shot crashed and again everything was silent and unmoving. The white land slept soundly and everything around seemed covered with a transparent sheet of ice shutting out warmth, sounds and movements. Even the steam in the gullies did not float, but imperceptibly arose, thickened, swelled, gathered in a heap and shifted into the indifferently empty sky which stood or moved—it was impossible to say which—over the forest and over the mountains; and this vacancy of impenetrable sky, beginning and ending nowhere—perhaps it was solid cloud—pressed down on the heart with a sensation of hopelessness and gripped you with a drowsy inertness.

However, somewhere the ground twitched and a far-off rumble was heard, as if potatoes were being tipped into an empty cellar—a rock, frozen beyond endurance, had shifted, begun to slip and slid from the mountain. Drawing pebbles, sand and all sorts of small detritus behind itself, growing and broadening, it rolled along and broke out of the clouds; dirty grey dust rose over the landslide, settling slowly for a long time afterwards on the snow and ice, covering its silvery whiteness, glittering with sparks, with a dead, grey overlay. And the river festered with ulcers for a

stirring wearily around the ice-covered rocks. There is something incomplete in nature, in winter itself, in the tormented river's emptiness and inability to find a place for itself; nature itself seems to be suffering with the river.

Unscalable cliffs stretched to right and left from the rapids to the round boulders, buttressed from the rear by the humps of passes and beyond by the dark shadows of the taiga. He could have got through, could have skied over the ice by the bank, along the edge of the bank or over the narrow veins of gullies—but alone! Alone—his own master! You might get lost, fall from frozen rocks, get caught up in a landslide or go under the ice—you yourself, alone! You would be sorry for yourself, of course, everyone would be sorry for you, but the pity would die down, like this lonely camp-fire here.

Nooma, Lyuma, Kureyka—it runs for more than 700 verst and forms two lakes on the way—Anama and Dyupkun. The Kureyka is fed by water from the eternal snows and flows over the permafrost. The eternal snows are dead, but how many rivers, lakes, marshes, forests, flowers and grasses live from them! On the Yenisei, the ice melts always earlier than on the Kureyka and then the banked-up water rolls up the tributary, disturbing and stirring the high water of the lazily sleeping Kureyka, which in spring flows backwards, in reverse, stacked up backwards, sometimes for half a month and sometimes longer when it comes to itself. It bangs about, howls and rushes about. A bad river, generally—deep, long, yet not permitting river transport far. It is accessible to helicopters and to rowing boats, too, if the boatman has plenty of muscle and guts.

It would have been wonderful to subdue the mountains and descend to the thin, boggy woods within the Arctic Circle that press the little town of Igarka to the Gubernskaya channel in the quiet winter period. Alone and on skis, with a dog, he would have struggled through to the town, steamed himself in the bath-house, drunk with his mates and told them all about that "nightmare" that had happened to him in the taiga.

Akim returned to their camp when it was dark. In his bag he brought squirrels, a polar fox and a skinny sable, driven by its kind to the hungry cliffs along the river bank. After skinning them, the hunter scraped up embers into a mess tin, took it into

the tent, warmed it from inside, took off his sheepskin and told Elya to remove her thick jacket, which made her look like a hunched old woman.

"Why?" she asked with a glance and he looked sternly at her in silence: "Take it off!"

Elya fearfully brought her shoulder-blades together, then huddled. Akim's ear, like a cold telephone receiver, touched her back and was pressed to her body. Under his ear there seemed to be not the human apparatus of breathing but a piston engine, croaking and puffing, its nozzle squeaking, the breathing was congested, catching at something like sour cream under a beater, slapping and flopping.

"And how's my soul in there, doctor?" Elya asked through trembling, parched lips, finding the strength to joke.

"Not so good."

"What shall we do, then? Die?" Elya squeezed out a painful smile as she pulled on her chilled clothing, still trying to preserve a humorous note.

"Why die?" Akim responded. "Why die?" And she suddenly realised from his aloofness that he was not joking, that he treated the possibility of dying seriously.

"Akim, dear!" She touched him, bringing the hunter out of his pensive mood. "I'll hold out... I'm getting stronger." And she hastened to drive away his anxiety and, more, her own. "Don't be afraid of the mountains! If this were the Caucasus, it would be another matter! These aren't high. How much further is it—fifty kilometres, a hundred? We'll do it! I'll help you. Roska and me. I'll go on my own feet, I will... There's no need to stop here. We've lost almost a day. The days are getting shorter and shorter... I'm fine, it's just my lungs... But people with tuberculosis live, even people with one lung. They struggle. We'll find our way, we'll find it, Akim!"

"She feels something," Akim thought, put on his guard. "But she doesn't understand, she still doesn't understand. Wastes words... Words aren't worth a thing here."

"OK, we'll sleep," he said, interrupting his companion. "Take counsel with your pillow, as they say."

Elya smiled gratefully at him, glistening in her eyes. She embraced the hunter, nestled in the tent. Akim fell peacefully asleep, hugging her in any way, trying

The sledge slowed and almost stopped, but man and dog, strained as taut as a string, continued to pull—not a load but an impossible burden—uphill somewhere and she huddled herself up on the sledge, within herself, in order to be smaller, lighter, to help the man and the dog at least in this. She tried to pray again, but could no longer remember a prayer or even a single church sentence. From a mouth locked shut by the freezing cold she gritted only the word: "God!... God!... God!..."

On the threshold of a hut, powdered with fresh, clean snow, a man lay with a strap and a rifle over his shoulder, arms and legs flung out. An axe gleamed in his belt. The man was vomiting. A dog with a toy harness on its thin, gaunt body and fur crushed down on its shoulders was hurriedly and obsequiously clearing up the porch and, at the same time, cleaning her master's face with a pinkish, agile tongue.

The door of the hut was bolted with a stick and dry fir poles stood against the wall, riddled by beetles; fir branches were heaped on them to make a shelter. By the door the yellowish mark of an axe-stroke was still visible on a log. Obscenities had been scrawled on the log at some time in black letters. The stick used to go hunting, a shaved pole, was pushed through the wooden handle, the end set against the rotting frame of the door. The end of the chimney over the roof was scorched and full of holes; wood was stacked under cover to prevent it from being blown over by snow, a path had been made through to the slope down to the river and there were tracks, a lot of tracks, made by unevenly worn felt boots. There were also the hasty, dense tracks of a dog, looking like crumpled leaves cast down by the wind.

"Where have you brought me?!"

The man no longer wheezed and had stopped writhing on the porch. He sat on the step, spitting and getting his breath back.

"Where have you bro-ought me?!" Elya seized the lapel of her companion's sheepskin with unexpected strength, jerked him from the porch, shook him and drummed her fists on his chest.

He looked at her exhaustedly, still understanding nothing, but firmly removed her hand, took off the stiff, frozen strap and unharnessed the dog. Freed from the harness, it shook itself and began to roll in the snow.

"Rub my face," he ordered, scooping up snow in his mitten and

holding it out to Elya. "And don't scratch. It hurts."

Crushed by his calm authority, Elya obediently rubbed the hunter's face, scraping off the pale round spots, which were charred around the edges, but inwardly she was flooded with darkness and a fury she had never suspected in herself bubbled in the darkness.

"It hurts him! Just think, it hurts him!" she began in a choked voice. "Doesn't it hurt me, too?" Suddenly she shrieked "Doesn't it hurt me, too?!" And she began to lash his face, still unfeeling and unrubbed, with her mitten. "Swine! Swine! Swine! Where have you brought me? I want to go home to my mother! Home! To Moscow! Swine! Swine! Swine! You're all swine! What are you doing with me?" The mitten flew off into the snow and she struck him on alternate cheeks with a hand shrunk to skin and bone. "I shall die here! I'll peg out! I can't hold out! I can't!"

Akim caught first one, then the other hand and squeezed them so that she jerked like a mortally wounded animal. Blood ran down his chin from a split lip. He wiped his lips, looked at his palm and gritted out in a strangled whisper

"They only feel their own pain and only value their own lives!" And with unprecedented, blind fury he, too, yelled. "You can't hold out?! Then you'll croak! You'll make a dainty dish for the polar fox! At least there'll be some use from you! No, I'll do one more good turn—I'll bury you beside your fancy-man! There!" He thrust his hand in the direction of the Ende. "So you won't be bored. Well, now!" Akim shoved her out of the way. "You just get under my feet!" He set about pulling the rucksack from the baggage, removed the mess tin, filled it with snow, fresh, white snow, scraping a fine layer of it from the piles of logs, and all the while blood seeped from his lip and ran in a thread down his chin, losing itself and drying out in the tufts of his frozen beard and he licked and licked the blood from his lip, which did not coagulate in the cold. Elya saw a redly swimming film on the white of his teeth and felt sick. As he walked past her towards the door of the hut, the mess tin packed with snow in one hand and a handful of birch-bark in the other, he seemed to stumble against the girl in her clumsy, frozen clothes, bloodlessly blue and trembling like a puppy but still stubborn and furious. "Won't you be so kind as to enter the establishment?" Throwing down the birch-bark, Akim seized her by the scruff of the neck, like a kitten, and dragged her

towards the fire, swearing with such hatred that she was frightened and started walking quickly.

The door of the hut creaked and opened and Eliza went the depth of the icy winter quarters, striking her chest against the table and sliding to the floor. She stayed there on her knees, her arms on the table and her face on her arms, hearing the hunter thumping legs against the stove and feeling how a dense, salty smell of burning birch-bark flowed through the hut and how pitifully the stove creaked and buzzed. The snow on it began to hiss, melting in the mess tin. "A cup of tea and eat that! Hot and with sugar!" It was thought and swallowed, but saliva did not moisten her throat and became stuck, for she was so dry.

And while Akim lit the stove and hauled their belongings from the sledge, walking back and forth, he swore constantly, but no longer savagely, grumbling rather than swearing.

"Spoiled kids! Little spitters! Be grateful that were ever at all! I don't know who I should light a candle to. The little live animals should have eaten us and then they would have ripped the pelts off those animals to make collars and hats for a big fluff like you. Eaten us—well, to hell with us! It's Rozka I'm sorry for! Why should she have to suffer, poor thing? Why should she make a wolf's breakfast? O-o-h, you bastards! You bastards!"

Rozka, frightened by the cursing but even more devastated by the road, lay sprawled flat on the logs behind the stove, but had the strength to raise her head when she heard her name.

"Sleep, doggy! Take a rest!" Akim caressed her. And there was so much tenderness in his voice that resentment again began to boil up in Eliza: she was worse than a dog!

The stove radiated warmth. "I've got to get to the stove, get to!"—and inching over the plank-bed, she crawled like a blind person, feeling her way, towards the stove, fumbled behind it for Rozka, put her arms round her and thrust her face into the thick fur, no longer registering that smell of dog which had once been so hard for her to bear. "My doggy, my little doggy! My doggy, my little doggy!" A feeling of agonising pity swept over her, taking away her strength and lulling her.

She was awakened by a rough shaking and felt how damp, hot and stifled she was, how unbearably her face hurt, how her arms and legs thawed out and how her whole body ached.

"Well, shall we eat, then?"

Akim did not speak to her any more and, indeed, returned to the hut, which was creaking from the savage, stunting cold, late at night, ate what he was given, drank tea, choking and groaning, then, collapsing on to the trestle-bed, immediately fell asleep, his emaciated face, spread over with grey moss, sticking upwards. Elya lit the stove and cooked food, covering her face when she coughed, she treated herself with infusions of frozen whortleberries and with pills, which Akim had dumped in a heap on the table with the words: "If you want to live, treat yourself!"

Back in autumn Akim had ranged over the lightning-blasted forest on the Ende, beyond that bluff on which the old Siberian cedar reigned. He had foraged in it, collecting dry wood and taking it to the bluff, by which, beneath the cedar, Georgi Gertsev slept, knowing neither misfortune or grief, now, truly, a free man. The frosts, as is the way of the Arctic, gave way to blizzards, prolonged and savage blizzards, and a quite wretched time began. Akim hurried to light a large fire before the snow drifted, piling it around with damp branches to ensure that the smoke rose higher and thicker. What he had been unable to think out before, what had occurred to him on the crest of the range as he looked down from the heights at the river, smoking with winter steam that made it obvious from where the Kureyka (Smoky) had got its name, and heard and saw an aircraft on a regular flight, had inspired in him the belief that the pilots who flew once a day over the winter hut would notice, could not but notice the smoke of a permanent fire.

And the pilots, being Arctic aviators, did notice. Not immediately or at once, but they noticed the persistent alarm signal of the fire even during the night and a query was sent out from the flight group to all local radio transmitters. Was there anyone in area number such-and-such on the middle section of the Ende River?

"There is!" replied the radio operators of the Hunters' Union.

A helicopter descended above the bluff marked by the dark sentinel of the solitary cedar, grunting in the icy cold, and lowered a bag containing a travelling medicine chest, a day's provisions and a note with the question "What happened?" on a rope. Akim thrust a scribbled piece of paper, prepared in advance, into the bag. "A seriously ill person is in the winter quarters. Help requested." In reply he received a note, this time thrown down in the bag, without a rope: "We are making an urgent flight. Will

pick you up on return journey. If possible, mark out a landing site."

A small stack of dark ash branches had been cut for this purpose, should it eventuate. Akim spread them out on the snow in a square. The result was something like a pen, embracing almost the entire gently sloping bluff with the Siberian cedar and the unbuckled ice along the bank of the Ende—a better landing site in this rocky area, strewn with shingle and blasted trees, could not be found.

Coughing and hawking, Akim took Elya to the landing site at the same half-smashed sledge, the runners of which had been shaved by snow, blocks of ice and roots to papery thinness. Akim was gloomy and silent, his face unrecognisable, so frost-bitten that scabs had formed on scabs in layers. But his companion sitting huddled up in the sledge, no longer felt anger or pity towards him, or towards herself, either. When she left the hut moving across it with difficulty, thin, with a waxy, yellow face pierced by the blue vacancy of her eyes, she had coughed ceaselessly and loudly, clearing her throat with a tormented groan and spitting a thick phlegm laced with a bloody spider's web in the snow.

Akim wanted to sleep. To sleep and sleep and never again see or hear anything more. Not to feel how his ballooning face burned and tore, how his over-strained bones ached, how excruciated his hands, hastily tied up in dirty bandages, hurt him. Bent like an old man, he was scarcely able to drag himself and the sleds forward and when he had reached the bluff, helped Elya to walk to the cedar and seated her by the fire in a wind-break, he himself sank on to his heels and, pressing his face in his hands, rocked over the fire.

"Maybe you want to say goodbye?" he asked quietly, not taking his hands from his face. "We were travelling companions after all."

Elya shook her head, in a sign of agreement or maybe refusal but did not move from the spot, and when a small, pot-bellied helicopter hung over them, then descended into the pen, blowing off the snow and denuding a layer of sand, she remained sitting like a block of wood. Akim helped her to get up from the fire. Slowly, as if she was now without any feeling of joy, Elya moved towards the wide-open door of the helicopter, from which a young pilot, beaming a welcome, was looking out. He lowered an

flying slowly above the Kureyka, straightening out its course towards a long abandoned settlement, where they landed at an airfield scraped out of the snow, beside which a twisted larch and a single mossy paw of a branch stood dark and lonely. In the larch, sunk up to their twisted ends, were rusty hooks, some into place back in the 1930s, and sagging wires hung on to thickly coated with hoar-frost. They were holding, as it were, crooked log barracks, not permitting it to run away or slide down into the river—the airfield building had also been made of logs in the 1930s. The little shack was blackened and weathered, but the window-frames and supports were new, the patches on the roof were white and a new chimney poured smoke from amid the drifts of snow. At the top of the larch a "sock" flapped, the bottom blown out by the wind. The settlement some distance away had been built up around a newly built log structure with a sign-board, and all the houses in the settlement had been patched up, the chimneys smoked, tractors buzzed, vehicles drove past everywhere, the electricity burned. Akim would have been amazed to learn that this settlement was jammed to bursting with workers and engineers.

On the Kureyka, on the deserted Nooma-Lyuma, people were preparing to build a hydro-electric station.

The settlement medical attendant, old-fashioned in his solitude and, to judge by his nose and his fussy manner, a lover of the bottle, examined and tapped Elya. Then, without provincial airs and graces, he expressed his surprise with simple-minded frankness:

"That fellow did everything that was in his power right." And he went on, not without a proud sense of importance: "He knows what to do when lost in the targa! Well, now, your affairs aren't in very good shape, to speak frankly. For the time being you must neither fly nor travel. In a week, if you'll excuse me for making so bold, I'll fix you up a bit in the hospital, and then, bless us, you'll go home, to Moscow, to mum. They've beer and honey there, and a million doctors with silver hair!" Elya nodded her head, waiting for the moment to ask about Akim, but the attendant, talkative like many Northerners, forestalled her. "Your rescuer doesn't believe in hospitals, he's treating himself in the taiga way—goose grease, Russian steam baths with birch switches..."

quietly walking after them, trying at the same time to find out whether to embrace them or to put her hands behind her back and stand—then, when it was impossible for himself, he stopped near the broad back of the wall of the room with his hand.

"I'm sorry if everything wasn't..."

"What do you mean? What do you mean?" Elya pulled apart his damp skin with her mitten, keeping hold of it as if encouraging him to be bolder.

"When I used bad language... it was crude, of course," he insisted. "So please excuse my indelicate behaviour."

Before walking away he thrust some kind of ball into her mitten. It turned out to be a crumpled five-ruble note torn from his hand. Elya wanted to refuse; her mother would meet her in Krasnyy ark. She had money with her, warm clothes had everything, but she couldn't find it in herself to refuse the money, which Akim had borrowed from someone so that she would not have to use the bus in Krasnyy ark—she would be chilled by the wind if she did not take a taxi. She had to be properly looked after now.

"Oh, Akim, Akim!" The cold squeezed her throat, catching her breath. "Oh, Akim, Akim!" A hand waved from the aircraft, but Elya was quite unable to move. She, too, wanted to express penitence, to ask forgiveness for something, but she did not know, did not know what to say. Oh, if only it were all over now! She waited patiently, waited for Akim to be first to go—it would be awkward for her to move first and if only he would stop tormenting her with his clumsy politeness, behind which she could perceive something left frighteningly unsaid. "Oh, heavens!" Elya groaned, fearing that she would not be able to hold out now and would fall on his bosom in the old-fashioned way and burst into tears. "Why are we so lonely, so old!..." And her lips, wrinkled by illness, wind-blown and also dry and peeling, repeated and repeated: "Oh, Akim, Akim!..."

Suddenly she was transfixed by his rueful and, at the same time, strained gaze, heard herself stammering the words and broke away, covering her face with a scorched mitten that smelled of the camp-fire. It was impossible to say whether it was because of the crumpled fiver or because her fingers had frozen and become numb from the holes in her mittens that she coughed or wept as she ran towards the aeroplane. She staggered up the steps.

repeating all the time: "Oh, Akim, Akim!" and when she had entered the aeroplane she pushed her face into the seat. The engines were already running when she finished coughing and had recovered her breath, and the aeroplane, plunging over the uneven surface, was lumbering away from the hut with the striped airport sock and crawling out of the raked-up snowdrifts on to the runway.

Elya leaned towards the blank, white glass, breathed at the frost accumulations on it and wiped it with her mitten. She stubbornly sought Akim, sure that he was standing there alone in the cold and the wind, in the middle of the snowy field, and was filled in advance with pity for him and for herself, but the field and the trampled, spat-upon and sag-end littered area before the hut were already deserted. The plane dispatched, the airport's staff and everyone else standing around scurried back into the warmth.

Elya felt herself unpleasantly affected and once again she scanned the field with her eyes, looking over the airport hut and again lingering on the yellowish gleam formed by the branch of the larch tree. Her lips trembled. "Well, if that's how you want it! If that suits you!"

The aeroplane straightened up and halted for a moment, whipping itself up with a roar and trembling from tension or probably from fear of the empty spaces. Elya started, a man, shielding himself from the wind with the collar of a dirty yellow sheepskin, was hurrying from the direction of the river over waste ground scored by trenches and the foundations of buildings towards the settlement, which was dotted all over with holes dug for posts. "Ak-i-i-m!" Elya breathed the words in tender elation and dull anguish, pressing herself closer to the cold glass and blinking tears from her eye-lashes. "Ak-i-i-m!"

The snow had been scraped from the road by a bulldozer and heaped up in dirty yellow ridges at the sides. The man now disappeared behind them, now popped up briefly. The twilight, which had long since fallen beyond the taiga and the mountains, perhaps in autumn, or perhaps an age before, absorbed the lonely figure in the sheepskin, and even before the aeroplane had soared into the low skies the man hiding his face in his collar and huddling in the wind—or probably it was a spectre—had dissolved in the jerky shadows of evening.

The Buzzard, which had not at

seen

NO ANSWER FOR ME

Answer
Can ever be made to come back,
Just as the sun's speed cannot be eased,
And setting out to go back,
You won't ever be back all the same.
This truth is never simple,
Like death, undepictable,
Returning to place is possible,
But not going back.

Nikolai Andreev

Each time I fly away from Krasnoyarsk and the
silence of this sparsely shrouded, begins to fidget, drives itself
before me like a wild stallion and then tears away.
Viktorovskaya, I survey my native parts anew. It
gives me one more present—flying along the rocky
Yenisei, the plane sometimes flies over my village,
though it always seems to me that I am seeing it I
must bidding it farewell forever.

But until the river glitters at me like a mirror,
brought from Ust-Mama to Bazarikha delineates itself
and my native village comes swimming toward me

town with my eyes, watching it grow wider, more full of houses, noisier, smokier and rather more alien to me.

By a strange coincidence, my first distinct memories of this city are connected with fish. Over where the city's central square with the smart street-lights blazing on it now lies there was once a permanent market, filled with the shouts of the crowd, the squeak of frozen sleighs and the rattle of forged carts and surrounded by a wooden fence whitewashed with lime, and each waggon which touched that fence proved that the earth all around here was rich and black.

The local markets abounded in people and wares. The people would assemble as if for a holiday. Cheapness had been established here from days of old. I will cite a few quotations from a book by Peter Simon Pallass, who bore the titles of "Doctor of medicine, professor of natural history, member of the Saint Petersburg Imperial Academy of Sciences and Free Economic Society, the Roman Imperial Academy, the Royal English Assembly and the Berlin Natural Science Society."

Professor Pallass visited Krasnoyarsk in 1772, and, after noting that "there is almost no other place where the air is in such constant movement as here", the eminent scholar turned to an economic survey of the province. "The greater the harvest around Krasnoyarsk, the cheaper it is to live, and although I am utterly certain that there is not a single district in this prosperous empire of Russia where one might complain of the dearthness, yet in no part of this state does one find the produce of the land as cheap as here. The people here know no instance of universal harvest failure, nor of anything but a customarily good harvest. Moreover the inhabitants of Krasnoyarsk get splendid profits from the islands lying along the Yenisei, particularly from the islands farther up, where there grows a multitude of wild hops. For when many come here in autumn and, floating it on rafts to the city, sell it for fifty kopecks to a double a measure (A pound of rice sells for two kopecks at that time, wheat flour—double over that). For the most part, to get better profits, they take them [the hops] to Yenisei, Irkutsk and to other places, along the Tunguska where they do not thrive. Their abundance and the cheapness of grain give the inhabitants of Krasnoyarsk reason always to have honey brewed and on hand and to be on a merry pot, to make merry."

"Make merry!" This drove strengthening in the process, ran on as through the thickness of time. The market was ready, it

only did taste ice-cream a few times as a child, when I visited Uncle Kolcha Senior.

In the spring of nineteen thirty, Uncle Kolcha Senior knocked together a reed raft, loaded all his odds and ends onto it, placed his most lively wife Talya at the front beam serving as a rudder, himself worked the catchpole in the stern, and left the village. He settled in town beyond the stream called Kacha, on Lassale Street, where at that time everyone was building who wanted to and how they wanted.

Everything changed around him and turbulently moved forward, only Uncle Kolcha Senior moved no further and did not change, just continued to live the way he had in the country on a natural economy: a cow, a horse, a pig, hens, a dog, waggons, cellars, fences; even the gate was bolted for the night with an iron bar, and there was a wooden latch in the cottage. Uncle Kolcha wore shirts with a collar opening at the side in the old Russian peasant style and wide trousers that buttoned up, did not use a single city word, merely grew sad in appearance and in voice as the years went by and became fighthfully wily. Aunt Talya spent her whole life at the market selling the produce of their private holding. The couple lived strangely—traded, squeezed out every last kopeck, hid their money from each other, and then they'd go on a grand, loud spree—and squander all they'd saved.

Beyond the Kacha Aunt Talya was reckoned something of an investigating magistrate. She knew everyone here, and everyone knew her. And more than once it happened that when somebody had some money pinched or something valuable carried off from a cart, she would be advised by the tradespeople to appeal to Onika—that was what her favourite god-daughter called Aunt Talya and that for some reason was her name at the bazar.

The victim would walk along the top of Red Ravine, up against which one side of Lassale Street was squeezed, howling about the theft, while Aunt Talya pondered. "Well, well, well! Don't you howl now, don't you howl! How much money was there? Few hundred? Where'd you get such a heap of money? Sold a cow. Oh, well done! They kept their eyes out for a scatter-brain! When was the money? In your side-pocket? What was it wrapped up in? In a kerchief? Did you fasten it with a safety-pin? You did. Well, then it's Tokka Prokhorukhin! It's him, it's him, the dog! Neither the Churboukys nor the Tupars nor Khudukhs could get money from under a safety-pin. No, no, my god, they couldn't

but at this moment we discovered a board which had been torn loose. We moved it aside and turned up inside a fenced-in area, the midst of which a fellow in a nylon shirt was serenely asleep. A large and powerful dog was sniffing and licking him. Catching sight of us, the dog was at first struck dumb, unable to believe in the boredom of his existence and, not growling, but sobbing with a voluptuous swallow. He rolled his ring along the taut wire raising his hackles as he moved, baring his yellow teeth, to let us and everyone know that he had not been appointed to his job for nothing.

After greeting me, Aunt Talya began to fuss, but mostly with her hands and tongue, for her legs functioned poorly, but she knocked off a four-ounce tumbler of vodka in honour of her guest and kissed the bottom with an inveterate swagger. "That's us for you!"

There was no cattle or any other living thing in the yard, not even a dog. Grass and young birches were taking over the place. Uncle Kolcha had brought the seeds here in the hay. They had lain in the earth, trampled down by the livestock, and now they had shot up, and grew lushly indeed! Nine birches, each more beautiful than the other, wild-grown trees stronger than planted ones. "Kolcha's soul has risen in the white birches!" said Aunt Talya, shedding tears.

At that moment there came to my mind the lines of the little-known poet Alexei Prasolov, who met a tragic end and was valued and published by Tvardovsky: "What is the meaning of time? Of space? Appear one day for inspiration and labour and remain yourself forever."

...How long my memory has been circling over the city, yet I've been flying only minutes. I nearly missed the station, and not so much the station as the blockhouse. Seemingly out of place and superfluous, it sticks up whitely amidst the intertwined, shining railway branches. But this is the most needed, the most necessary building—the blockhouse was once the heart of the station. It used to pulse with the live blood of currents and vessels coursing through it, the strings of the wires would quiver and hum musically, the bulbs on the control panel would twinkle now with an ominous red light, now with the foresty, green eye of the wood-sprite, now with a deadly white, now with the violet customary to those of us who have worked as shunters ?

each other, the gadgets and gear droned, clicked, and squeaked, the blockage levers turned with a crash, cables and hawsers apparently controlled by nobody writhed like little grey snakes, here and there, here and there. The controller would give orders into the receiver now gaily, jokingly, now distinctly, with metallic, imperious notes in his voice, and explode seemingly out of the blue, turning his cap back to front for some reason: "Well, number sixteen! Well, number sixteen! You'll get what you deserve from me! See to it that ten-oh-two is brought up to the ninth line! And take the empties—that's your punishment—from the ninth! No coal? Time to refuel? You can pull the empties up the spotting with a pair of skewbalds for all I care! Get them up there, and that's all there is to it! That's all, that's all!" and he would put his cap back in place.

The tense life, so dear to the heart, of a freight station, wartime work...

"Which of you young eagles is going to the mill?" The controller was rocking from heel to toe, from toe to heel, in front of the factory school students assigned for practical training, who, of their backs leaning against the warm batteries which hissed as in a bathhouse, had all dozed off in the warmth, and he looked as though he were holding a buttered roll behind his back. We all jumped up at once and stood at attention. Our mouths were stretched into happy smiles because a trip to the mill was a present, and what a present! While the empties or sealed "pulpmans" filled with flour were shunted and made up into trains at the points, we had time to treat ourselves to some wheat or the flatcakes made from the left-over flour swept up in the freight cars which were continuously being baked in the iron stove in the switchman's hut.

In passing, the quick-moving factory-school student would pour grain into the preliminarily torn pockets of his pea-jacket, knowing ahead of time that he would be searched when he left, that the watchmen would shake out all his boots and give him a kick of vexation. But the watchmen were people, too. They had their own kids studying to be something or fighting somewhere, and, seemingly exhausted by the struggle against us, they in reality hoped that good would be repaid with good and that someone was also feeding their kids, they would spit, swear, give the culprit another small kick—for educational purposes—and "overlook" a few grains somewhere—behind the seams of his

pea-jacket, in his breast-pocket or a little purse sewn to his fly. In the evening we would roast the wheat on red-hot dorm dampers, cheerfully crunch on the grain and mimic the watchmen, recollecting how cleverly we had duped them and savouring how even more cleverly we'd dupe them on the next trip.

There it is, the mill, right under the plane. Grey boilers, elbow-pipes and chimneys stick up into the sky, and in the yard, right there in the yard, a shunting locomotive, one with a smoke-stack, is bustling about. There are no steam-engines used for shunting these days, but this one survived, and smokes and gives puffs of its whistle as though it were blowing bubbles, two oblong ones and one little round one. What does this mean? One long is forward, two long—backward, two short—halt or slow down. Or is it the other way round? one long means backward, two long—forward. I've forgotten the signals. Life goes by and its marks grow dim. The barracks of our factory school are gone. They were built in rough haste, with slag-filled walls, and rotted away. They were ugly, and so they were swept from the face of the earth. The modern barracks with many storeys, all grey, were erected in their place.

Well then, while I was staring at the mill and reminiscing about the factory school, I nearly missed Roaring Gully, where a stream used to thunder—it was there once, but now is no more.

The bulge of a mountain bearing the shiny new buildings of an Academy City, somehow bare, shelterless and alien here, flashes into sight and disappears under the wing of the plane. Ahead lies a pancake of an island, looking like a green cow turd plump in the middle of the river, but my gaze hardly lingers on it, my eyes hasten towards the place the sight of which always makes my heart falter.

Shalunvei, Shalun's Bluff, hacked by explosions on all sides, like a grey lump of sugar that has been earned around in a pocket for a long time—here was my mother's last refuge.

They say that a person's soul lives and remains immortal as long as there is someone in the world it left behind who remembers and loves it. When I am no more, my mother's soul will finally rest at peace and cease its sufferings, because it is suffering not somewhere there in the heavens, but inside of me, for I exist, her continuation, her flesh and spirit, her unfinished thought, song, laughter, tears and joy.

We are flying high, and I sense, no longer by sight but by inner

vision, the hillock not far from the mouth of the Large Stiznevka, overgrown with short thick grass—as in the past, glinting Bald Mountain seems to flow down towards the Small Stiznevka.

Above the Large Stiznevka, along the ridges and mounts, there is nothing but burnt forest. I am nearing the end of my life, and yet I have never been to the Stiznevka saddle-back, nor was my grandmother ever there, or my grandfather, or any of my fellow-villagers. Mushrooms and berries—they always grew down below as well. Timber was not felled on the cliffs. Nature herself prescribed that the molten-yellow, embered pine grove with its harmonious trunks should flaunt its beauty against the dark-blue skies. But empty-eyed transistormiks trained in gymnasiums scaled the cliffs, strolled around, had a good time and, to complete their experience, loosed fire on the mountains.

At the top of a ravine churned up by tractors near the Small Stiznevka, two shivery poplars, all that was left of Kasyan's plot, still reared up a year ago. This used to be the site of the only garden in the entire district, planted with trees brought in from the surrounding woods by a slightly eccentric man named Lapunin. Some only the poplars were brought here from other parts. Some drunken tractor-drivers bulldozed them into the river with their caterpillars, just for the heck of it, for lack of anything better to do, and did not even glance back, did not see, did not hear how the kind, foreign trees, which had given shelter to birds and children, shade to the garden, coolness to the house and beauty to the river, crunched in their agony and speechlessly raised their broken boughs.

And here is my native village. But before the body of the plane screens what is ahead and below, I turn to the right, look for the slanting filament, threaded into the sharp needle of the inlet of the gorge formed by the stream Karaulnaya, and try to catch sight of the buoy-keeper's hut, where urban holiday-makers now live and, instead of potatoes, have planted parsley, dill, thubarb, Turkish daisies and gladioli.

In the late fifties death carried off my brother Misha and his faithful helpmeet Polina. Their little children were left without mother and father almost at the same time, and Misha's son Pyotr took the family onto his broad shoulders on his return from the army. A grey bog with a white underbelly crawls along the smooth surface of the river with a double flourish behind it. Not quite a cutter, not quite a dove, with a roofed bow and narrow

windows, it rattles for all the Yenisei to hear from early morning till late evening ferrying people travelling here and there. A freckled, strong fellow resembling Polina captains the boat. "Pyotr! Blast you!" the Ovsyanka chaps swear. "Our hens have stopped laying because of your noisemaker!"—"Your womenfolk have stopped having kids—is my motorboat also to blame for that?"

The shadow flying in front of the plane slides over old wooden and new slate roofs. The village of Ovsyanka has spread. Two new settlements have arisen on the steep slopes here. The builders of the hydro-electric power station left the village a woodworking factory to remember them by; it is the main enterprise for three settlements.

The village stretches along the river, scrabbling across the pole strings of the railroad and the gossamer of the highway, spilling out in mushroom clumps on the first slope, and lingers and comes to a halt in front of the gentle incline of Black Mountain. The riverbank with its nearly uninterrupted line of fences looks as though it had been hemmed by a sewing-machine. Motorcycles, motorboats and cars the size of small beetles are visible in the streets and on the bank. I look out for grandmother's old house, where Aunt Apronya now lives, but how can you find it from such a height? It is small, has been newly roofed, the yard narrowed, and the kitchen-garden cut off from the forest by state roads and squeezed in on the sides by new plots. There in the square of one fenced-in patch a woman's kerchief shows up whitely, flicking like a miniature butterfly. I pull my companion toward the window, point down and say that this is my Aunt Apronya weeding radishes. For some reason my companion does not laugh at my joke, merely sadly shakes his head.

I pick out the little square of graveyard near Fokin Brook. The invariable, lively friend of our impetuous childhood, the site of great games and amusements, Fokin Brook no longer flows in summer; it is diverted by hoses to the vegetable-gardens. At noon the course of the stream can be divined only by a muddy rut and pale pebbles washed out of the earth. At night it still squeezes out of the woods in a living stream and stealthily creeps across the village to the Yenisei. The cemetery is also "non-functioning", is becoming overgrown with goose-foot and nettle, for the dead are now taken to Ust-Mana.

The Mana! I searched with my eyes for the red comb of the

Mana headland. It wasn't there! The hydro-electric people had whisked it away. And the beautiful river itself bristled with hummocks of floating timber. A bridge had been built across the Mana. When the bottom at the mouth of the river was bored for the piers, timber appeared in the samples at a depth of eighteen metres. A drowned and buried forest, mostly larch, which almost does not rot in water. Maybe our descendants will thank us yet for the timber we have stored in such a cunning way.

Farewell, Mana! And forgive us! We have tortured not only nature, but ourselves as well, and not always out of stupidity, but more often out of need ..

The plane rocks and leans on its right wing. I catch a glimpse of the exposed Mana Bank, the stream Minzhul draws out in a rippling line in its trench, the mountain-passes, frozen like malachite, with an attractive new city going up in terraces along the lower slopes, come floating toward me. Any minute now the dam of the HEP station will appear, but I do not look ahead, I crane my neck to get at least one more look at my native village and Ust Mana in the tail of the aircraft, and the blue outside grows deeper and clouds flash like explosions under the iron of the plane's belly. Moving to the right and up, the plane speeds along, its left wing leaving the woods and mountains and my native Yenisei, whose banks from this frightening height look, as in olden times, untouched, virginally pure and plunged in shaggy quiet, for the gaping azure of the heavens. Here and there the Mana cuts crescent moons through the taiga. Everything is so peaceful and majestic, but why is my heart weighted down by an oppressive melancholy and bitter anxiety?

A day before our departure, some fellow-Siberians talked my friend and me into having a look at the Biryusa River and HEP station. I had seen the power plant the previous time I was here, when it was still unfinished and surrounded by a human anthill, and now I was amazed at the lack of people, and it occurred to me that the enterprises of the future would become ever more depopulated. Unease overcomes the person used to noisy work in common, and he is seized with a sense of his smallness and insignificance. I was first visited by this bug-like feeling in a synchrotron room, and now it renewed itself at the HEP station.

On the way to the Biryusa, beyond the dam, I with difficulty recognised the old tub Spartak in an ancient, smokeless steamship, adapted for use as a fire guard-ship, mooring in a cove of



mouldy algae. Having experienced many sad meetings in my life, I can say that this was not simply a sad meeting, this was a moment of summing up, this was the line under the sunset period of one's life whose existence one suspects but which one somehow contrives to postpone drawing, contrives not to think about, and then comes the inevitable and doleful acknowledgement "Ye-e-s, we're getting old!..."

We did not sail, we flew over the reservoir on a speed-boat

The Biryusa was once in ill-repute in our parts. Visible and invisible wood and water sprites and other evil spirits were to be found here, and many people lost all desire to hunt and fish here. But on the whole, people said, the stream was bountiful and lovely. What we saw of the Biryusa, even flooded with mouldy, stagnant water, defies description. Its unique, truly magical beauty takes one's breath away.

There is one special rock on the Biryusa. It stands ponderously in the water some ten versts from the mouth of the stream, resembling a half-open book touched with rust and time's decay. On one side of the rock, that which opens like a page toward the hinterland, the face of a person with a large nose, two eyes and a compressed, crooked mouth has been outlined, either by some ancient artist or the forces of nature, when you draw near it looks tearful, and when you move away, it seems to be grinning and winking, as if to say, alive and kicking, guys!

"There it is!"

I start and come to myself. The passengers in the plane are glued to the windows, unable to tear their eyes from the receding power plant. They are admiring the work of their hands.

My native Siberia has altered. Everything flows, everything changes, everything testifies the hoary wisdom of the ages. Thus it was, Thus it is. Thus it shall be.

To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:

A time to be born, and a time to die;

A time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted;

A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;

A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance,

A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

A time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away.

A time to tend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

A time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace.

So what have I been seeking? Why torment myself?

Why? Why?

No answer for me.

1972-1975

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